CONSPIRACY!

EDITED BY JUDITH K. DIAL AND THOMAS A. EASTON

STORIES FROM: ALLEN M. STEELE, SARAH SMITH, CAT RAMBO & MIKE RESNICK, DAVID L. CLEMENTS, JAMES L. CAMBIAS, & MORE!

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CONSPIRACY!

AN ANTHOLOGY OF ORIGINAL SCIENCE FICTION STORIES

EDITED BY
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&
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CONSPIRACY!

EDITORS' INTRODUCTION

Did you know that there is a secret government agency dedicated to creating conspiracy theories? It's true! We saw it on Facebook, when one Henry Flagler posted that he had quit his job there:

March 11:

HENRY FLAGLER: Hi, guys! I've never posted much. My job didn't permit it.

ALBERT PILLOCK: Whaddaya mean? Didn't permit it?

HENRY FLAGLER: Seriously! If they caught me posting anything at all but especially about the job, I was out on my ear. Or maybe doing time.

ALBERT PILLOCK: Oh, come on! Government work?

HENRY FLAGLER: You got it! A special secret government bureau. But now I can post. I got sick of it and quit.

ALBERT PILLOCK: They have a web page?

HENRY FLAGLER: disinf.gov, but you DON'T want to go there. You just see a cannot-find screen unless you know the trick. But they know who you are.

PIPPIN YORK: This isn't going to be one of those crackpot conspiracy yarns, is it?

HENRY FLAGLER: Funny you should ask. That's what we did. Made up conspiracy theories to keep people's minds off their real problems.

ALBERT PILLOCK: You are pulling our freaking legs!

HENRY FLAGLER: No way!

WILLIAM WEBB CROSS: Ya way! You're making this up

EMMA FIRKIN: Go way, hater

KATE FIRKIN: I told you I'd keep an eye out. They're monitoring you. You should shut up now.

HENRY FLAGLER: Just don't lose your job over this, Kate.

KATE FIRKIN: I'm quitting tomorrow

HENRY FLAGLER: About time. Maybe I'll move in with Ed Snowden. You can come with me, babe.

ALAN FIRKIN: C'mon. Conspiracy theories are bogus.

HENRY FLAGLER: Sure, of course. I got my start with the crop circles thing. It started out as a prank by a few idiots, but by the time we got done with it, it was all UFOs and aliens.

ALBERT PILLOCK: So what's the latest?

KATE FIRKIN: Run you idiot! They're on their way!

HENRY FLAGLER: Lol. I'd better hurry then before those black choppers land on the roof. The car's all packed. Pet shelters. You know what they do with the dogs and cats that don't get adopted?

ALAN FIRKIN: They kill 'em, the heartless bastards.

EMMA FIRKIN: Oh, no!

HENRY FLAGLER: Worse. They butcher them, package the cuts, and ship them to Mexico and South Korea.

EMMA FIRKIN: http://koreandogs.com

WILLIAM WEBB CROSS: https://www.facebook.com/notes/jelena-paunovi%C4%87/11-countries-which-still-eat-dog-meat/10151059019076930

OLIVE FRALICK: Hah! The secret ingredient in Tex-Mex chili!

HENRY FLAGLER: Now you know. And I have to run. You'll hear from me later if I stay clear.

ALBERT PILLOCK: Good luck, Hank!

GEORGE WEISS: If [illegible] language arts

ALAN FIRKIN: LOL

PIPPIN YORK: [illegible]

ALAN FIRKIN: LOL again

GEORGE WEISS: [illegible] might be the same [illegible] that tried to [illegible] like when I was in the [illegible]

ALAN FIRKIN: [illegible] Wall Street Journal was then [illegible] manager and Richard Dow, Assistant [illegible], inspector was [illegible] to find [illegible] the most [illegible] of governments covering..."

ALBERT PILLOCK: You around, Hank?

EMMA FIRKIN: He and [illegible] to [illegible] Mr. M B were [illegible]

GEORGE WEISS: That's [illegible] should've been [illegible]

March 13:

OLIVE FRALICK: [illegible] But where's the kale go?

PIPPIN YORK: Haven't heard from her

ALBERT PILLOCK: [illegible] this morning on the way to work. Never. Must've [illegible] of the mailbox

OLIVE FRALICK: So she ran off with him?

PIPPIN YORK: Oh the Mills got [illegible]

ALBERT PILLOCK: You [illegible]

PIPPIN YORK: [illegible] any story I hear about pet shelter cutlets.

March 14:

ALBERT PILLOCK: [illegible]

PIPPIN YORK: I wouldn't be [illegible] government [illegible]

GEORGE WEISS: Great smokescreen

March 17:

OLIVE FRALICK: Okay, Hank. Enough kidding around. Post something.

ALBERT PILLOCK: Maybe they really did get him?

OLIVE FRALICK: And Kate?

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Reeaally! Truth? Or just truthy?

If you do not believe in conspiracy theories, then it is at best tautological. If you do believe, or if you are just desperate to find an explanation for why there are so many conspiracy theories out there, see http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/List_of_conspiracy_theories (then perhaps it sounds more reasonable). And maybe as Alex Proud writes for *The Telegraph* (Jan. 15, 2013), "Perhaps the World's Conspiracy Theorists Have Been Right All Along" (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/men/thinking-man/9802601/). Perhaps the words conspiracy theorists have been right all along will be up there in the list to Paul Di Filippo for passing this along).

Skeptic magazine ran a piece on conspiracy theories at http://www.skeptic.com/downloads/conspiracy-theories-who-why-and-how.pdf. It notes that conspiracy theories connect the dots between random events and assign human intent to the supposed connections. Then quickly becomes plots by powerful people or organizations working together in secret to accomplish some clearly stated goal. Eventually, evidence to the contrary just becomes proof of the cover-up, which generates new components of the conspiracy to refute. And of course anyone who can swallow one conspiracy theory has little trouble swallowing another. Unfortunately, the more educated you are, the less likely you are to be a conspiracy believer—"at still one in five folks with post-graduate education show a high predisposition for conspiratorial belief."

If you have no disposition to conspiratorial belief, you still have to be careful with a few. The better-known conspiracy theories

The CIA killed JFK for Moon landings and even the recent New Horizons Pluto flyby was faked for Illuminati or the Masons or the Rosicrucians or the Jesuits or Jews who have ruled the world for hundreds of years so I'm sure these stories are going to be used as UFO conspiracy examples for years to come. Liberals conservatives socialists churchgoers and even those who resists the New World Order will soon start getting crazy watching the chatter on Facebook. I have recently seen stories on the old tired story that 9/11 was a government plot because of all the rumor. Now domestic terrorism is false flag attacks or drone presumably for similar reasons.

Of course you don't have to be a political conspiracy to be desperate. When Orbital Mind was in college research for papers always seemed to happen at the last possible moment. If things refused to add the way they were supposed to the trick was to grab a ton of stuff and data as possible and connect the dots to make them fit together. In the mode of conspiracy theories anything that didn't fit got ignored. One term paper received a B with the instructor's comment "Well written. Do you really believe this?"

I'd like to think my students were smarter.

Okay. Now you're probably thinking what does all of this have to do with writing? Well I'm glad you asked. Here's the pitch we started talking to writers about doing an anthology of conspiracy theory stories that we sent up the chute and then the project was approved with the title *Out of NESFA Press*.

And so. You have a world full of conspiracy theorists, mostly imaginative people who need to write stories on conspiracies. Some address existing conspiracies like the ones listed above. Others are more personal like Steven Dutch's story about Bavarian Illuminati and Shannon Fay's story about the German New World Order and a lot of other things that would make great quotes as pull-outs or is that a type of pastry? And Dave Trippo explains why people disappear in cities. Aliens and lemurs are involved. Jeff Hecht solves the Shaver mystery.

So we post-actual conspiracy theorists have up new stories. Alan M Steele's QM intervenes to save the world from the quantum multiverse quality management board. Does it work? What could go wrong? Well, a lot as it turns out. Meanwhile Rick Kennedy and Mike Resnick discover that technology minds and Hawaii

Shub offers a cover-up. James Cambias reveals the truth behind Santa Claus. Rex DeCarlo takes on rumors about cell phones influencing the weather. Adrienne Kress asks who would want that technology and what would the side effects be. And speaking of the weather, Sarah Smith blames it on squirrels.

And finally, Steve Rasnic Tem takes us to a place where even the works of fiction may be believed by someone. But what? In each case, you will have to make up your own mind. Is it truth? Or truthy?

We hope you enjoy this book, a collection of science *fiction* stories. But then, we're part of the cover-up!

Judith K. Dial
Thomas A. Easton
September 2015

ASHLINES

by David L. Clements

Who's in charge here?

Another ant spread out and headed for the wall. Bob watched it disappear into a crack in the stone floor. He picked up a piece of charcoal and drew a circle around the crack. The ant emerged from the crack and walked around the circle. It stopped and turned back. It walked around the circle again. It stopped and turned back. It walked around the circle again. It stopped and turned back. It walked around the circle again

but at a terrible cost for the prisoners and, sometimes, for those working with them.

But that wasn't his department. He was good enough that he could stay away from that end of the business, keeping his hands clean and his conscience salved with the idea that he was saving his clients from something far worse.

Time to begin.

"Have they fed you?"

"What?" said the prisoner.

"Have you been given food or water?"

"No." The prisoner shook his head, trying to catch a glimpse of the man standing just behind him.

The interrogator reached into his jacket pocket to retrieve a small bottle of water. He twisted the cap, making sure the noise of the plastic seal tipping was as loud as possible.

The prisoner started at the sound, then tried to jerk his head away as the interrogator reached from behind to hold it. He raised the bottle to the prisoner's lips.

"Here. Drink." The prisoner paused for a moment, then a decision made, that the broken seal meant the water hadn't been interfered with, he gulped thirstily. "See, things get easier when you co-operate." He lowered the bottle, now half empty, and placed it just outside the reach of the prisoner's shackled hands.

The interrogator sat on the empty chair, sliding it back to make himself more comfortable, following his usual script despite the urgency.

"That's what we need – a little more co-operation. Information to confirm what we already know. You've done well, held out for longer than anyone expected. But why hold out any longer when there's no point."

The prisoner coughed. "Who are you?"

"My name's Smith."

The prisoner gave a short, cynical laugh.

"No, really," said Smith, despite what everybody always thinks. "And you're here to soften me up before the heavies start again."

Smith shook his head. "That's over now. No more beatings. We got what we were after from someone else. All we need from you is confirmation."

The prisoner frowned. "Someone else?"

Smith took a sheaf of papers from his pocket, unfolded them, and looked through the top few sheets. "Seven, in fact. Most of you, colleagues have been hanging out. Some are talking to us. Smith looked pointedly at the prisoner's shoulders. Some of them look your size. He looked up. "We expect to rescue the hostages in the next hour or so, but if you have any information that would be most helpful."

The prisoner shook his head as if trying to clear it. "Hostages. But we rescued them from you!"

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The prisoner looked at Smith as some things slipped into place. He was sent for a reason, Smith was questioning him, and he was discussing inconsequential things with a group of whom he had previously had only a fleeting, badly edged dose injected through the pilot's escape hatch. But there ...

"Why do we need to be here?" asked the prisoner suddenly.

Smith looked at him without stopping and thought this was just more time wasting or it could be time to get down to the task in hand. If he had been through the process correctly, the drugs should be starting to have their subtle effect.

"Are we London the City of London or her?"

Smith decided to play along. "Apart from the Thames, a Roman city. Then a lot of history."

"Let's go back before the Romans. Before Old King Lud and the rest."

"This is a history lesson?"

"Legends are good ways of getting ideas through that would otherwise be hard to get across. Myths, for example, for the Romans."

This was getting them nowhere. Smith decided to bring the conversation back to the present. "Moses. He was the Commander to the temporal Mandarin. Lots of power. Lots of money. And that's what I want to talk about. And so much else with respect to it."

The prisoner looked at Smith. "Moses. He was the protector of them all. Long ago. Power. No. Wait. Did you say 'whenever' you said the City? Whenever you pass through the gate? The portcullis? The portcullis set up years ago?"

Smith raised his eyebrows in question.

"Dragons," said the prisoner. "The City's symbol, and so much more, is the dragon."

Your poor benighted Smith was beginning to get impatient. The prisoner must still be playing for time. Maybe the wine wasn't having the desired effect. Maybe the beating had left the prisoner injured, or too ill, and the Smith wouldn't be happy if the amateurs in the police had messed things up. Nor would his employers.

Wayland continued the prisoner. "Before the Romans, before Londinium was dark with some very old powerful and secret forces. Hats around it started. London, he tells the Lyers Company, is the power, the money. Some tried to stop it because they felt the price being paid was too great. Alfred moved the capital to Winchester but it was soon dragged back here. As long as the Guilds are paying the price it can't be stopped."

Smith kept listening. Lots was sorting out what the prisoner was saying. He believed it himself, at least, but was such a bizarre story?

"What price?"

"It's been tried before many times. There's always a reckoning, a different more public price to pay, but paid by those with power, not the usual victims. Cromwell tried hardest, him and the puritan Commonwealth. They stopped payments for years, but there was revenge."

Smith could see where this was going. "The Great Fire?"

The prisoner nodded. "How else would dragons complain? And it wasn't the last time. London's burnt to the ground so many times there's layers of ash all the way down. Now you know why."

"Which brings us to today."

The prisoner nodded. The drugs in the water had certainly loosened his tongue, even if what was coming out was insane.

"We rescued them, those children, abducted kids, orphans, being looked after by one of the rich City guilds, training them to go off to do charity work abroad. But they're not. They're due to be tonight, burnt as payment to some of the things that make this City work." He paused, then looked Smith right in the eye. "And it didn't stop with dragons. There are other, darker things in the long, corrupt history of this place."

Smith nodded. The interrogation was not going well. The prisoner might be sent to trial on circumstantial evidence but a jury sent a man into some institution for the rest of his life. Quentin might even serve what he had made up to waste time.

Smith could see that the prisoner believed it and was simply mad at the specific distortion of the facts that might put the police off their trail.

But he was [illegible] had already [illegible]

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I'm going to have to [illegible] Smith stood walked to the cell door and knocked.

Smith left the [illegible] the prisoner alone and walked up three flights of stairs and down a long hall to the chief's office. He knew the number he had been given by the police switchboard moments ago, surmising what had been said in the cell.

He received [illegible] instructions he had hoped never to receive.

I understand [illegible] others be contacted. The voice at the other end of the [illegible] protest short with a curt reminder of their authority. The call ended.

Smith had [illegible] room for a few moments to think. So this is [illegible] brought to bear and [illegible] a few moments for [illegible] power [illegible] bring to [illegible] immunity case. He turned to [illegible] Smith said.

"Who left it?" he asked.

Special [illegible] Smith. [illegible] but everything was in order. She handed the case to him.

Thank you. Smith replied. He took the case but for a few moments [illegible] what to do with it. He thought. He found that it was surprisingly [illegible] the tools he might have expected.

Some [illegible] Others had [illegible] Other had [illegible] appeared [illegible] Smith set the [illegible] letter was [illegible] Smith took a few deep breaths. He was reminded [illegible]

honest with himself. He knew this day would come ever since he'd heard there were secret methods of interrogation guaranteed to succeed. He'd studied many books and sketched clearing some cobwebs from his neck before heading down the stairs.

He returned to the interrogation room and sat opposite the prisoner.

'You have one final chance to tell us what we need to know.' He placed the case gently on the table in front of the prisoner. 'If I open this case, things are going to be unpleasant.'

The prisoner looked him in the eye, sneered and spat on the floor.

'Very well,' said Smith. 'That is what you want.'

He snapped open the two locks on the case and lifted the lid.

Inside were two sheets of paper, inverted to cover the lid, hiding most of the interior. One sheet of paper was blank, the other covered with writing.

Smith read these instructions and frowned. They were simple yet mysterious.

And yet they were the ones to be followed, and he was used to doing what he was told, no questions asked, in circumstances like this. He took the blank sheet of paper and wrote down the three questions he was permitted to ask:

Where are the hostages?

How are they protected?

Who are your co-conspirators?

He broke the seal and lifted the cover to see what was inside the case.

He blinked, not believing what he saw, not believing it could achieve what he wanted.

His training kicked in and, despite his disbelief, he followed orders.

He placed the contents of the case on the table, pointed towards the prisoner, and placed a pen next to the list of questions on the table to the prisoner's left. He closed the case and put it on the ground, revealing to the prisoner what had been inside.

A small, plush dragon sat on the table, one foot tall, with a red furry body, yellow belly, and green scales on its back. It was small, but to Smith had brought back memories of when they went on their first holiday together in Wales.

The prisoner frowned not understanding thinking this was another cheap manipulative trick.

Maybe it was but Smith felt it was much more

He understood the [illegible] moved towards the door

Something made him pause.

He thought [illegible] at the back of his mind, a tinge of [illegible] He turned and saw the case lying beside the [illegible] thought *I meant to take the case away with me.*

He bent locked the case picked it up and went to the door He turned back to the prisoner [illegible] on it to be let out Nothing had happened [illegible] prisoner was staring at the dragon Smith blinked surprised to smell [illegible] wafting in as the door opened Macbeth was [illegible]

He left the room the case in his left hand and the guard outside the cell secured and locked the door behind him leaving the prisoner inside with the plush dragon.

We need to get Scott to do this Smith told him This area needs to be cleared for the next little inmates Nobody is allowed down here until that time is up."

The guard [illegible] looked puzzled What's the matter with him, Sir?"

Not trusting himself to be [illegible] Smith paused for the [illegible] from the [illegible]

The guard nodded [illegible] up the three flights of stairs.

[illegible] started [illegible] screams unlike any the interrogator [illegible] in his experience of information extraction.

[illegible] enough to resist the rest of the night [illegible] stairs and hurried down the stairs towards the cells [illegible] Smith was already shouting the start to stop and [illegible] guard on the prisoner's cell

The door to the [illegible] already opened he said I'm doing nothing to [illegible] know we have authority to do what's necessary."

The [illegible] turned [illegible] reluctantly leaving the cells and screams behind as the [illegible] Smith

followed some of them to the canteen, making sure every door between him and the cells was solidly locked.

The screams stopped after precisely five minutes. Smith knew this as he was keeping a close watch on the time. He knew not to go down to the cells for another five minutes.

The silence was harder to bear than the screams—not knowing what had happened in the cell, not knowing if he would get the answers he needed.

After what felt more like five hours than five minutes, Smith returned to the cell accompanied by three curious and very well muscled policemen.

He unlocked the door.

The room was empty.

There was no prisoner—his shackles dangled empty from the chair—and there was no plush dragon.

All that was left was the sheet of questions, which now bore answers to each of them—and that was not the prisoner's. And on the floor beneath the prisoner's chair, was a short line of dark gray powder. It might have been ash.

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The information didn't help.

A rescue team was sent to the location Smith was given. The hostages and the kidnappers were found, but somehow a fire started. The battering and everyone in—hostages, kidnappers, police rescue team—all burnt to a crisp. There were no survivors.

Smith thought this was odd, as it had been raining heavily all day.

They tracked down the other members of the prisoners group, the ones who had got away. Every one of them was found hanging in their rooms, from ropes tied with an unusual and distinctive knot. Smith heard after that one of the forensic scientists muttered something about the knot being Masonic, but he could never get any confirmation of this rumor.

Everything he had done that night had been for nothing.

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Smith walked in the front door. He never returned to the family home the next night. Before doing so, he had concluded there were some

agreements he did not want to be party to. He was going to move [illegible] to go somewhere [illegible] and [illegible] species.

But the first [illegible] and [illegible] was [illegible] and the black dragon [illegible] with [illegible] image. He [illegible] was mixed up with [illegible] he had seen the day before the new species, but older. When he [illegible] and [illegible] more clearly this time.

He stopped [illegible] right by [illegible] gathered [illegible] and [illegible] he [illegible] every single one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[illegible]

POSTCARDS FROM LEMURIA

Jeff Hecht

Did they have trolls in the 1940s?

If I had been reading the best-sellers instead of pounding out words that no one would ever see, I would have suspected the instant message from Megan. But I had been out of touch for days. The power had failed and burned out my computer's modem while I was trying to finish the final 10,000 words I needed to pay the rent. I had to get the manuscript on my illegal attic apartment

Megan: Hey, I understand you're doing a project for you. Wanna talk?"

I responded with a curt yes. Then I scratched the remaining stubble on my unshaved face and rummaged in the pile of laundry on the floor for a clean shirt. Megan had been one of the few people I knew in high school who actually read books. What had she been doing since then? What was she seeing of my cluttered hovel?

Someone on the Weird Science-Fiction Writers forum came up with the name of the guy. He began, "I've never gotten without some kind of weird crap about getting back to me. Sounds like a weird. Who was the guy?"

Great to hear from you. I said that he was a writer and professed. Shriver was going to help my PhD project so I contacted him about him to me. He had written about beings called Lemurians and he claimed captive for years in underground caves

Ray Palmer, the editor of a pulp mag called *Amazing Stories* published Shaver's accounts as science fiction, but claimed Shaver had been in the caves. They had flying saucers before the flying saucer craze. I was going to call my thesis "Madness and the Invention of the Hidden World" and I had collected everything I could find on Richard Shaver. If I had had the sense to read more of it before I proposed the dissertation, I would have known trying to explain Shaver's insanity was a hopeless task. It didn't work out," I said, not wanting to go through the whole fiasco again.

"How much you have on Shaver?"

Even though we were talking about the caves and editing books Palmer published, I picked up a couple of books about Shaver and a lot of stuff from websites. He painted some weird rock books that became outsider art long after he died."

"What you make of it?"

I don't know. Reading it hurt my head. That wasn't quite how I wanted to start, but when I stopped to find a better way Megan jumped in.

Digital," she said. "Put it through data mining software for analysis. Then search the internet to find similar patterns. Artificial intelligence analysis will reveal the primal patterns behind conspiracy theory. That's the project."

"Who's it for?" I asked.

Megan pointed to herself and smiled, very happy with myself, smile.

That was not what I wanted to hear. I needed a job, not another of Megan's wonderfully interesting but economically fruitless schemes. I must have looked dismayed. Megan is poor at describing emotions with words, but she is brilliant at understanding expressions.

Megan's head moved and for a moment a new steel mask appeared on my screen. Adrian Mattingly Corporation. I had never heard of it, and been so for many months, when I was working for a company. It seemed to have nothing to do with Megan's project, until I got to the second paragraph and read "CEO and founder Megan McCall will remain as Chief Technology Officer…"

"You just made a ton of money!" I said, awestruck.

Wearing her cat who at [illegible] shrouded

I was hoping Megan might be [illegible] but she was [illegible] inspired to Shaver and [illegible] place. She sent [illegible] at stapes for the UFO craft hatched a year ago. I [illegible]

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Megan called [illegible] was on a bronze plaque beside [illegible] brick [illegible] She had [illegible] from [illegible] the first floor where the fire trucks used to wait and she [illegible] second floor offices. It [illegible] to make [illegible] conspiracy theories.

"Is that possible?" I asked.

She shrugged [illegible] "Can't do any worse than the psychologists, can we?"

I [illegible] together and signed up for [illegible] with a big name in the field [illegible] new interpretation of obsessive [illegible] second semester she got busted for [illegible] the past several years.

Megan shifted [illegible] mind. Armchair intellectuals [illegible] for data mining. She began [illegible] minds and [illegible] Manager managers over [illegible] comments to [illegible] explains what they want [illegible] designs [illegible] about the [illegible]

More [illegible] Megan [illegible] the data trails that people [illegible] to determine what people wanted so [illegible] Soviet figure [illegible] the Shaver Mystery?"

She shrugged. "We'll [illegible] my search and [illegible] the material [illegible] research budget. Might as well use it."

What could I do but go along? I needed the money, and I knew it was all crazy. Better the computers reading the stuff than me writing about it.

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I brought my laptop and boxes of old magazines and books the next morning, and we set up space to work in a corner of the server farm. Megan had been using it for software development and testing, but it was slow time. The corporate types who ran the company didn't know what to make of her, and had let her set up the private space. "Told them it's to test recognition of behavior patterns," she said. "They don't care."

We hooked up the laptop. I had long lists of bookmarks and several hundred downloaded files, so Megan wrote a few lines of command code to automate the process of inputting the information. "Do you want commentary?" I asked after it started running.

"I have background on some of the files."

"What kind of background?"

Things that people said or wrote about them. Like the stories in *Amazing Stories*. Palmer claimed he rewrote the stories, expanding I Remember Lemuria from 10,000 words to 30,000, and adding the footnotes which explain the things Shaver said he had seen in the caves. Palmer also explained the language Shaver had developed to explain what he claimed he saw. Deros were detrimental energy robots, not mechanical but organic beings that did evil things without awareness or thought. Telaug was something like telepathic augmentation. "There were all kinds of rays that controlled people and things."

"Believe any of it?"

I shook my head. "Dennis is. No evidence for any of it that he didn't write."

Figured that. "Don't need it yet. First run data mining software to compile and analyze what it finds in your files. Then it crawls the web to find more information by itself."

"How does it verify the data?"

"Consensus model," Megan said.

I paused to think. I doubt that's a good idea for conspiracy theories. They're copied all over the Net, but the copies mutate as

people to write them. Bogus information can get added in the rewrites. Nothing gets verified when you're blogging. And there's no price when you're blogging. And there's no price

[illegible] Megan and Ned to look at how the open world's consensus strategies works. It should conclude all the variants of each concept for statistical analysis. We'll see how that comes out and discuss then generic ways to resolve conflicts.

[illegible] to the time the Mean Girls were supposed on a giant wall screen. A thirty-seven-year-old Shaver is not seen here from his birth in Peru, Vermont, in 1907 to his death in 1975 in Detroit, where his wife put him in a nursing home. He appeared in 1943 in Pennsylvania. Where had the data come from? I asked.

[illegible] stuff from other [illegible] sources, Megan said. Added in the questionable or conflicted dates and to see more. She typed in a code and more words appeared during the missing years. The word words were Promethea, putting Shaver in a mental hospital being treated for paranoid schizophrenia. Green words were Shaver's "In the caves."

I asked how she could resolve the conflict.

Next, I'd cut data [illegible] typed in another code and words appeared. Black [illegible] Richard S. Shaver found in [illegible] State Hospital in the Criminal Insane. The screen blanked and [illegible] with a more refined version of [illegible] census records posted on a genealogy site.

[illegible] place names and [illegible] were the first of treating mental patients with [illegible] therapies, several types of shock treatment. I [illegible] and [illegible] to [illegible] the place.

Megan typed in more code and [illegible] and placed in articles by Jonathan Metzl, a psychiatrist professor who had somehow obtained records.

[illegible] was a long and [illegible] excerpt from a thirty-year book, and we both read in silence with Megan [illegible] Dagmar's each time we turned our [illegible] toward [illegible] other. [illegible] thought [illegible] seeming they were [illegible] our notes [illegible]. The [illegible] diagnosis was paranoid schizophrenia. [illegible] the last century, when it was a death sentence. I [illegible] that the asylum [illegible] for a long time.

Megan broke the silence. "Too many words. That's enough to drive anyone insane."

I agreed. It all seemed clear. Shaver must have suffered horribly. Delusions, nightmares, post-traumatic stress, and whatever tortures passed for treatment at the hospital. Nightmares of the sadistic hospital treatment seethed in his mind to create the delusions of the cave. The hold-overs. Lord knows what stories had become the Shaver mystery. I need to go outside, I said, and Megan came with me. We walked back and forth, but it was cold, so we sat on the back patio of a Mexican restaurant, nursing our beers because we didn't want to create any delusions of our own.

How did Shaver get out when nobody else could? I asked, looking at the table.

I don't know, said Megan. But we'll try to find out.

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I needed rest, too, so I left. I didn't need the deros right now.

It started with me carrying a basket full of dirty clothes to the basement, but the stairs kept going deeper, and the laundry room loomed like a cave. A deros man in a white coat appeared, and when he turned around I had a long skinny nose dangling halfway down his chest. So I turned down the deros. I stood paralyzed as he talked, not understanding a word, as the unintelligible noise became recognizable as human. It stopped, and I got on, and when it started over I knew all the passengers were deros and other strange beings.

I woke in a cold sweat in the early dawn to hear the beeping of a truck backing up. I was too shaken to go back to sleep, so it took me two cups of Captain Crunch's High-Octane Instant Coffee to feel coherent enough to open the computer and read the news. I debated buying more coffee, but I couldn't be sure how long Megan would last. I needed to take the morning off from the Shaver mystery.

I was in the shower before I opened my email, expecting little but spam and angry comments. I was surprised to see a message with no subject. The Shiver Mystery. I wasn't sure whether people would think, so I opened it.

You beat me to it, Jeremiah, and I went down all those stairs. I had been standing there for a long time, and I heard the sound of cars

of torture and sc[illegible] would [illegible] be [illegible] forged email address.

[illegible] Richard Shaver [illegible] reaching out to hurt me personally.

I needed [illegible] two [illegible] asked Megan and asked if I could [illegible]

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I could hear [illegible] house too. Megan [illegible] because the servers were making so many [illegible] I called [illegible] got the [illegible]

[illegible] attack."

[illegible] minutes [illegible] and [illegible] opened. Megan was [illegible] I tried to [illegible] door behind [illegible] down a little, I asked what happened.

[illegible] Shaver Mystery [illegible] to find [illegible] mental [illegible] about [illegible] sent [illegible] the [illegible] Cool puzzling [illegible]

"Attack?"

[illegible] gone. It's one [illegible] scares. Tries to [illegible] big can't stop it. Seems to come [illegible]

[illegible] computers [illegible] away by sending [illegible]

What happens [illegible]

Megan [illegible] that. Sometimes [illegible] from Her first [illegible]

interrupting the search. I asked how the search could still be running if the servers didn't have. Not access. It seemed obvious to me, but not to Megan, and it took me at least ten minutes to talk her down to the point where she would let me start shutting down servers "to see what will happen." But then she couldn't tell me where to start.

In the end, I followed some power cords back to a big black box labelled UPS and hit the EMERGENCY SHUTDOWN switch. The black box asked me if I really wanted to do that. I said yes and hit the switch again. It warned me that all operations in progress would be lost if I hit the switch again, so I did, and the fans that had been whirring frantically wound down slowly.

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"What did you learn from your search?" I asked Megan, as we sat on the front steps of the old firehouse, sipping clear green tea to soothe our nerves.

"Must have triggered the attack." She looked across the road at an old one-room schoolhouse turned into a medical marijuana dispensary. "But can't see how. Have searched for Shaver stuff before without causing problems. Found your Shaver stuff that way."

I didn't know enough about computer networks to challenge her on that, so I went back to my original question. "What did you learn from the search?"

This time I got her attention. "Not much. Asked it to show words that correlate with Shaver's device and got one word out before the servers started going crazy. What's a 'troglodyte'?"

"Cave dweller." I answered, and it made sense in a way. The data mining software had searched the web for cave-dwelling degenerates and had come up with a word that meant something pretty close.

"Wish I had finished," Megan muttered. "It's supposed to output the top 20 keywords on the first pass. We only got one."

I asked if she was sure that the program might have crashed before the attack. She insisted we needed to try again, rebooting the servers and using a different set of ports to make the server less vulnerable to attacks. She explained how to reboot each server after restoring the power, and after a couple of failures I got the instructions to work forward and worked my way through the servers one by one, keeping them offline until she could work through the patch.

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It was almost eight in the evening before we got the new search up and running and we left the office with Dana still running software to check through the data. We went out for pizza and beer, neither of us quite ready to be home. I didn't tell her about the email until we got back to her place.

It was Megan and she seemed to be a woman on the Net I learned to only use in text and no pictures.

"You got that kind of mail?"

Megan nodded and mumbled a few words too softly for me to understand. After she stopped talking I didn't ask her to repeat what she had said.

We were silent long enough for me to understand. Sean was off the Net, probably out cold or making love. Wrote spam filters that catch most of my mail. Doesn't comment or post on any of my weblogs anymore. She'd get a few but now we got through yesterday first in long time."

"I don't understand why they do it. What makes them do it?" I asked.

Don't know. Just evil, I guess. Degenerate trolls living in moldy basements. Maybe the women, being geeks, don't get laid.

They don't seem to have written anything regarding the Shiver Mysteries either," I said. This was the first time I had gotten any comments on anything I had written. Most of the hate mail paying attention left Wondering if anything I wrote had shown up, I pulled out my phone and turned on the mic. I set it down after recording the silence. I was sure the spam, and the hate mail, related to Shiver was legit. Deep, vengeful and unrestrained mail. I didn't have to open them. I showed them to Megan.

She then showed me her own. I couldn't tell from her expression that she had seen worse than me. From the words I could tell Megan could hang with the best of them. Her site had a few more pictures that would make Dana gasp. Enough to keep us laughing for a few minutes. We needed a release for a few minutes. Then it was back to work.

Maybe we're too tired. I suggested. I don't feel like I'm getting anywhere right now."

Megan agreed with a shrug. I knew her well enough to realize she had been running the same loop.

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The whine of the server fans woke me in the morning. I got up and started pacing the floor in Megan's living room. She roused me as soon as she heard the toilet flush. She had been up earlier.

"Correlation is still at 1.000," she said.

I looked at her, bewildered, until I realized what she meant. "Did the new run tell you anything?"

She nodded. "Trolls Internet trolls correlate with deros at 96 percent confidence levels. Target of the top 20 terms. Dog odytes scored at 100 percent. Software sent email this morning."

I shivered for a moment. What had she let loose? "Do you believe it? What can it mean? Deros aren't real. They are the nightmares of a man who spent time in a mental hospital and has been dead for the late '70s. Deros can't be real."

Servers crashed this morning. Troll messages now coming in through. There so far have received more than a dozen Deros [illegible]."

She handed me her phone. Several messages on screen were flashing red. I read a few sentences and turned away, shaken. What the threats referred to was unspeakable. Not the horrors that Lovecraft called "unspeakable" merely for effect, but the horrors that Palmer claimed to have edited out of Shavers stories so he could publish them in pulp magazines. They're sick beyond belief, but the threats can't be real. I couldn't imagine anyone could do such things.

Megan's spouse slowed, "The messages to her she raised a level of severe stress. They know where we are. Wonder. They've tasted the servers they can come here. Have enough money to go off the grid and stay. Don't take the chance."

The power crashed as I wondered what to do. The whine of the server fans started winding down. My phone chimed with an emergency message. Without thinking, I grabbed it and looked at the screen. I read "NOW WE COME."

I turned to Megan and said, "Let's go."

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These are my final words about Lovecraft, deros, and Richard Shaver.

Megan and I [illegible] haunted Shi[illegible] [illegible] How [illegible] and [illegible] Nest [illegible] [illegible] dr[illegible] [illegible] no more of deros or of trolls

Shi[illegible] escape the me[illegible] t[illegible] Megan and [illegible] be forgotten. [illegible]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[illegible] than a subbasement, so he turned to the Internet to find the answer

HEAVY WEATHER

by Rev DiCerto

I was in the water. I could see the storm. Its effects will be

The Flagstaff sheriff gave me a card before I left that said he had another job for me.

"Hang on to it," he said to him. "I'm not getting back."

"Hang on to it a second, I'm serious," the man said.

"No, gracias."

His strong accent made it hard to hear. His voice was flushed. He looked excited, or nervous.

"Come on, get a grip, man. I'm not the only Filadelfia working around here."

"You're the best. I can't trust it to anybody but you."

"Cuanto?" I asked: *How much?*

He told me.

"But you still owe me. You got me to one more. What you got? More cutters?"

"You don't get it. I'm a pilot. I'm not a fisherman. See, after the oceans rose and the world got hot, I was one of the people who saw the idea to leave the land was what people did. After the end of the cities, I was one of the last to fly the old airplanes. Now I'm a pilot. That's what I do. That's what I'm good at. That's what I know. I'm not a fisherman. I'm not a cutter. I'm not a boat captain. I'm a pilot. I'm a pilot. You're a pilot. You're a pilot. You're

machine the Pahdinos killed you. You lived outside of the cities or the barbs and you were not a Pahdinos a member of a larping team.... Well, you get it.

Maybe more than that. He handed me a photograph. A dark haired man stared back at me. Dark complexion, dark eyes, either a mestizo or some other kind of Latino. Jutting chin, thick mustache. Steven's hair looked like he was wearing a rug.

"Okay. He working alone, this gangsta?"

Probably not. I'm told to look out for four of them."

"Four? For that much? Hardly seems fair."

"I think it's that important to the gummit."

"Sam, you're from dead cow. I'll count on four dead banditos, amigo. Where are they?"

Came through town two days ago. Have headed southwest. Unless my pieces not country down there. They walking."

Riding horses. I'm told they came into Santa Fe on motorbikes but the sheriff there impounded them. They put up a hell of a fight. Killed two deputies."

I nodded. "Don't mess with the larping crews."

"Not that I've heard."

"Okay," I said, and went out to get my hoss.

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Steven sat bolt upright on the sofa, hitting the mute button on the TV remote. A distant siren sounded on the edge of hearing, the emergency sirens were blaring outside. He'd just now noticed it, but it must have been going for a while. Lights and a haze outside of town. He stood and dashed to the window.

Outside the wind whipped the trees hard enough to tear leaves free. Through the yellowish twilight he watched a branch crash to the ground. He turned back to the television, scanned through the stations. On the local Access cable network, red text crawled across the bottom of the screen. WEATHER ADVISORY it read. STRONG WINDS AND HEAVY RAINS REPORTED. But then the lights went out and the TV fell dead.

It had to be a tornado. Christ. Steven thought it was completely out of season. He had been told it rarely touched as far south as Hell Washington, but it was even known for tornados.

Steven dashed up to the bedroom, rummaged through a drawer. I should have left out a pair of socks and a bra, but in the right. He hung, naked, in flash. He bolted into the closet, threw on a leather jacket, [illegible] to come back to sort it out. He would do it all over again. He [illegible] extra batteries and building. Night [illegible] slammed out the front door. He was [illegible] the hill from the road but [illegible] the [illegible] Spirit [illegible] Arthur [illegible] stuck the [illegible] against the front [illegible] engine. He jumped into his Jeep, started the engine, [illegible] the moment. Granted the engine [illegible] Already [illegible] leaning across [illegible] enough pace for the Jeep to [illegible] He [illegible] road, turned right, made to town as fast as he dared, [illegible] windshield wipers swinging at the highest setting [illegible] long [illegible] him to see.

He [illegible] that was time to [illegible] He [illegible] far enough from the house.

❖ ❖ ❖

When I [illegible] the power [illegible] and [illegible] for February [illegible] Over [illegible] long [illegible] All [illegible] gleaming white [illegible] stretched [illegible] rising and [illegible] in [illegible] by brown [illegible] strip of [illegible] [illegible] from [illegible] stacked [illegible] [illegible] I [illegible] once [illegible] the sky [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] must have looked [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] always [illegible] [illegible] the ground.

[illegible] framing [illegible] This [illegible] was where the summer [illegible] were the only [illegible] [illegible] Huge [illegible] sowing [illegible] [illegible]

the remaining cities and the farms were the only places that were equipped to produce it.

After a few hours riding southwest, I came to a little creek just a trickle of agua, a depressed slash across the whiteness of the Llano Estacado. Beyond the stacked down edge of the Llano a few prairie plants clung to life, green and yellow and brown. Leaving off the agua, I rode my horse down to the creek's edge and filled one of my canteens—the one for agua limpia—not the one for whiskey—and let her drink her fill. While she was drinking I took a little walk upstream to stretch my legs, enjoying the way the heels of my cowboy boots crunched on the dusty soil and bits of rock and dead plant matter. And only a couple hundred meters away from where my horse was drinking, I came across a path. At least two horses—and probably three or more—had come across the Llano from the northeast and watered there, then taken off to the southwest.

Muy bueno. It had to be my band of Utes. I lifted my green sombrero and mopped my face with the bandana tied around my neck and rushed back to my horse. I had a trail to follow.

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It had seemed an innocent enough first meeting. Professor Neils said the FEMA man, canting across the dinner table and extending his hand. "So glad to meet you in person."

Steven shook. "Nice to meet you, too, Mr. Davis. I'm sorry, I still don't understand why FEMA wants to hire a cellular communications expert."

Davis smiled. "We're concerned about the weather."

"Yeah, well, so am I. I mean, climate change is raising holy Hell with our weather. I'm sure you fellows are interested in averting as many disasters as possible. But shouldn't you be talking to an environmental scientist? Cellular technology isn't going to help with that."

Davis sloshed a French fry through a puddle of ketchup and popped it into his mouth, nearly dripping on his suit tie. "Well, maybe not," he said. "But maybe it will. I understand you've been out of work for six months. Why not just humor us? It's not like we're asking you to do anything else right now. Come to Denver

work with the team that's where Ross signed through the door and said, "Weather is the second-to-last word that's what we're offering."

"I love to make money, but I love it when we're robbing the taxpayers."

When Senator Lautenberg asked what's worth his money? We don't need to throw good money after bad. Steve, I'm willing to give it a shot. You're the best in your field."

"I was the guy who invented what would be working. I invented a dead-end technology."

Still, the Navy remained open to Hugh. Davis said. "A lot of things we learn to segregate. Its technology might have other applications beyond carving phone signals."

Hugh's career was about to intersect with the military.

Davis smiled and told me, "I'm with DEMA. We think cell phone signals may have an effect on warfare patterns. Now come and help us study that."

It sounded like an interesting challenge. It was certain, a good cause. Not every problem scientists discover concerning climate change has to do with the worst. In the Arctic, sea ice completely vanished that summer for the first time ever, ocean waters rising rapidly. Yet methane had turned out to be melting nearly two decades later than predicted. Sound advice and efforts to prevent it proved successful. The Apostle to humanity recorded history had ever seen, uncovered.

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He hurried down the corridor. At times it seemed the wind would blow him off the ice into the open water. A sudden held him transfixed. Down below, a polar bear was headed directly toward the ship. Hugh kept walking and the bear gave out.

He circled around to the other side. Ahead, he saw a mound of ice bulging. A gigantic polar bear was lying across the hole. His mouth was open to the water, ready to grab any seal that might get over and to the right. He stood the bear for a while. Then it took out, stopping that stood wide down to the front of the ship. Then it

ditch that had become a moat beyond which a farmer's field looked sure to prove a quagmire impassible to vehicles. Steven slammed the Jeep into reverse.

Lightning arced across the sky and the rain turned to hail—huge white pebbles the size of marbles. If Steven had feared for his windshield before, now he was certain it was not long for this world. The noise inside the car was deafening. As he backed up, wind buffeted the Jeep hard enough that Steven feared it would topple over.

There was a cracking sound and a heavy crash and a second tree fell behind him, blocking him even in reverse. The Jeep was imprisoned. Steven slammed on the brakes. Now what? He grabbed his duffel and leaped out into the rain and hail.

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Davis accompanied Steven on his flight into Denver. Steven felt at first like a prisoner being escorted to a new prison, but Davis was affable and a good traveling companion—though judging from the way the man kept looking behind him at every chance, he clearly had some sort of a death wish.

Denver International Airport was shockingly large, given its location. It seemed to sprawl endlessly in every direction. In the main concourse, Steven was puzzled by the phrase DZIT DIT GAH inscribed on the floor and he raised an eyebrow toward his companion.

Davis rolled his eyeballs. "Martian, if I'm not mistaken."

A minute later, Steven was surprised when Davis stopped before a closed door marked "Maintenance." Davis withdrew a key from a pocket and opened it.

"Are we going to get a cab?" Steven asked.

Davis gave him an enigmatic smirk. "Not quite. Steven, we're staying here for a bit." He gestured for Steven to enter the exposed corridor.

Once they were inside, Davis shut the door. From the inside, illuminated by harsh artificial light, the door looked like something you might find inside a business, rather than the door to a janitor's office. A narrow corridor of white painted cinder blocks extended before them. Pipes and wires were bracketed against the ceiling at

unornamented blocks each subdivided and placed with a numeric code: 5A-1a, 5A-1b, and so on.

A strange cold feeling passed through Steven's belly. FEMA operates out of the Denver Federal Center, Lakewood, Colorado.

Davis gave one of his non-committal shrugs. "Our strategy on here FEMA CIA NSA Intercontinental Ballistic Missile and it's to where could be doing more of it. I just wanted to see you guys, the team you'll be working with and to get you out of the paperwork. We'll be heading to your first assignment tomorrow."

Steven was relieved. He was able to leave work for

Davis grinned again. "Of course, you will have to pass Steven. This is FEMA not the military, so we don't have to be doing research on chemical agents to unravel world history, so we can save lives and property. You have a lot of hard work ahead with the equipment on the way, good vehicles and plenty of shore leave. Now stay out of trouble and introduce yourself to the rest of your team."

Processing took place in a series of three windows. Though the FEMA people were friendly and professional, Steven could not help but notice the number of the Denver International Airport intimidating symbol in the processing area. He was given papers to sign, his head and fingers dipped in ink, uneasy feelings washed over him, and he was told to report for eight uneasy tedious weeks of classroom instruction and memorization tests he should be submitted to the test with questions and fingerprinted. His retinas were scanned. Urine samples were taken. He was photographed, ozone shots were taken, and Steven Davis repeated assurances of how fun the next few months all supposedly was.

Strangely, he felt more and more like a prisoner, locked up in a subterranean cell with no way out. Davis escorted Steven into a waiting room. A man and a woman were inside.

Steven Nelson and Davis pointed to the man and the woman. "The team you'll be working with. Now, back to the Academy physical and return to regular work. We don't think it will take a little time and get acquainted."

Davis swept out of the room. Steven's body seemed to betray him as he sat down. The three sat in silence for a few minutes. It was

kindergarten children forced to share a sandbox, none wanting to be the first to speak.

At length, Anderson, the climatologist, sighed. Flipping his salt-and-pepper ponytail over his shoulder, he stepped toward Steven and extended a hand. "Welcome aboard," he said through his trim beard, shaking with Steven.

Thanks," Steven replied, like a high school boy on a blind date.

"Nice to meet another scientist in dire straits," said Black, the physicist. Like Anderson, she was a few years older than Steven. A face that had probably once been very attractive had become pouched, showing the beginnings of jowls, with deep creases from her nose to the corners of her mouth. As if to contradict her name, her hair was a faux blond, cut into a shoulder-length bob.

"Dire straits?"

Black gave a smile like a grimace. "Yeah. I've been here six months. Anderson got here last month."

"Who's brought both of you on?" Steven asked.

"That's right," Anderson said. "I was out of work two years. Remember that leak of emails from climate scientists about four years back? The one the climate doubters used to prove their case, just because we implied that none of the numbers alone were conclusive?"

"Ouch. That was you?"

"Yeah, except that I was hacked. But I caught Dawson's eye."

"How's that?"

I suggested that if humans could cause drastic climate change just through random action, we might be able to channel whichever forces were most directly the cause of a given phenomenon. I suggested we might be able to find a way to deliberately manipulate weather phenomena."

"I guess that would interest FEMA. Nice idea, being able to divert a storm away from a populated area. So is that what we're working on?"

Black folded her arms, cleared her throat. "Yeah. Sure it is."

"What?" Steven demanded.

"Like Rich said, I've been here half a year," said Black. "I haven't seen a single thing that suggests we're working for a government agency."

Steven felt a wave of confusion pass down his body. "Who *are* we working for then?"

Bruce replied, "I'm not sure. But they're not government, not military."

"Not Black and Decker, I bet," Steven muttered, said Anderson.

Commerce?" Steven let breathless. "With all this security? All this secrecy?"

"Yeah," said Black. "Welcome to the Big League."

"I guess it's happens with those interests grab big enough," said Anderson. "All those mergers twixt public and private government and corporate, they get pretty big. Did you ever think maybe there was one group of super rich, super important people running everything? And did you think coming here that maybe that's who had gotten their hooks into you?"

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I'd been knowing the sailors' trade for a week and a half. Gracias a Dios, I'd passed the seasickness hurdle, here on the Lirp, with small approved farming operations. The folks had given me food and *agua limpia*.

I'd been sun-dazed, to be sure, pretty steadily. But as I went the rounds got more and more social, and I was stuck tending for myself. I'd had a few words to mutter, but I did those during watch. Sun and the wild animals were serene and I was told to call them because they could easily get curious and I didn't like going against the people's wishes. I don't care if that made for dull talk, but I had to live for today. You take what you can get out of the Lirp and it was a strenuous, vivid, exhausting, creative, heaven and I didn't have to enjoy it, anyway.

It also got hotter and hotter. It got hot to the point where I could no longer easily gauge the heat. I can usually make a pretty good guess up to about 95°. But here I couldn't tell at all what it was. It was simply hot. Loco caliente.

I didn't even try to be dainty and I was getting used to my bounty. I kept my sunblock topped toward the end and I wrote my name every chance I got. I drank even the rain I got too much. I ate my extra drinks. I mourned the fact that I'd pee and then, in hour

later a mouthful of whiskey. If you were going to be toodly, maybe it was better. You didn't give a shit of a fuck.

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The moment he left the shelter of the Jeep, Steven was dashed against the side of the vehicle by the wind. The duffel fell out of his hand. The wind whipped it under the vehicle, where the torrent of water rushing across the road carried it toward the ditch. Steven dashed around the front of the car, but the duffel sloughed over the edge of the road and into the ditch, where it joined the flow of flotsam headed downhill toward the town. There would be no catching it. Steven could not run so fast. He clapped his hand over his hat and ran forward, leaping over the fallen tree. It was still almost a half mile into the town, where he might find the nearest basement. He hoped to God he could make it there before the oncoming tornado arrived. Assuming he had read the weather correctly.

He ran fifty feet down the road, the wind knocking him sprawling onto his back. The torrent of water washed over him, and sheets of hail battered his face. One eye was struck hard enough that he wondered if he would be able to open it. But he gained his feet, and stumbling and running, hunched down, listening as best he might, he made his way toward town.

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The next day, as far as Steven could judge in the hermetic atmosphere beneath the Denver International Airport, where there were no windows and in the room in which they were kept no clocks, either, the three scientists were moved to the laboratory. It was like something out of a science fiction movie.

They were packed into a windowless van with heavily tinted windows. The van was bare of even the most identifying marks, which struck Steven as strange. Maybe Black and Anderson were right. When they emerged from the tunnels, it was nighttime, or full dark. Davis and four other agents ushered the scientists out of the van and into a huge black helicopter. Its motors were already spinning, and with the crew standing by, Dr. Steven had barely taken his seat before the choppers took to the air.

"Why three copters?" Steven asked.

Black [illegible] seemed to suggest something sinister was going on. Instead [illegible]

Supplies [illegible] on [illegible] a glance [illegible]

They [illegible] hours [illegible] appeared to [illegible] bed surrounded [illegible] Steven [illegible] Anderson across the mid ground. The air was cold and dry.

Voices [illegible] Orange [illegible] out onto the [illegible] ground. A guard in [illegible] professional mercenaries the government employed [illegible] door with a bang.

"Dr. [illegible] Olivet," he said, "I'll show you to your private [illegible]"

"I don't suppose [illegible]," Black said.

Davis chuckled. "Dr. Black, I'm sure [illegible] so paranoid. Of course [illegible] December [illegible]." Davis grew [illegible] morning. In an hour [illegible] transported to [illegible] copters to spend your days [illegible] valued employee. Just remember [illegible] work you're doing. We [illegible] shore leave."

"Dr. Anderson, Dr. Black, Dr. [illegible]," Davis [illegible] "I [illegible] Anderson. [illegible]"

Davis shrugged [illegible] "I'm not going to [illegible] lots of [illegible] doing here for [illegible]"

"Why don't you [illegible] Black [illegible] about [illegible] about [illegible] abouts to [illegible]

hands—much less the ability to create storms—should you be really successful."

In Steven's opinion, Davis made a sound argument, and yet Anderson's and Black's misgivings had taken root in his gut. He still had seen nothing to suggest Davis or anyone else involved in this project worked for the U.S. government—not an ID card, not a CIA agent with a badge, not a general with rank insignia on his chest. Entering the facility felt ominous.

Life in the compound was not unpleasant. The three scientists shared a suite of rooms. They had cable television, a library of DVDs, an exercise room with weights and treadmills, and—within certain prescribed areas—the complete run of the place. Their laboratory was large, outfitted with every piece of computer equipment and every technical gadget they could ask for. Steven got the impression that the entire compound was located underground; there were no windows, and the air had a processed feel, always cool, always sterile-smelling.

There was nothing to it but to work. There was virtually nothing else to do, except to spend the entire time on trivial entertainment. Within a few hours, the three of them gravitated toward the lab and settled into the jobs, which, as far as any of them could divine, was to create the means for their employers, whoever they were, to exert control over weather patterns.

"Okay, here's what the EHF waves look like." Steven pointed to the left-hand graph on his laptop screen. They had been in the lab for about four hours. "Here's our standard 4G cellular signal." He pointed to the graph on the right.

Black nodded. She looked pointedly at Anderson.

"Yeah," Anderson said. "This might be just what they're looking for. No wonder they wanted you, Neils."

"So, do you really think this signal could be used to prevent big storms? Or to divert them?"

Black groaned.

"Maybe," Anderson said. "But I'm guessing they have other things in mind. When it comes to storms, this type of signal might be useful in creating them." Davis dropped that hint outside, but Angela suggested it just a day or two before they arrived.

Something clicked in Steven's mind. He could not identify it. He suddenly felt that pressure. "I cannot force the device consider that," he said.

Blue pointed at the graphic of the UFO above. "That's a highly focused signal we've designed. Like a laser. What if we hit a Rock Angel there? Remember our discussion back in Denver before Ness came? You could cause a shock wave focused strong with that. Maybe even a tornado."

"Yeah." Anderson sighed.

"But why?" Steven asked.

Brick took a deep breath. "What's between the three of us is we've got the technology to compel them to do what we want them to do. To provide them with point-to-click weapons made to order. And judging by those nine wrecks there, it made perfect sense. All we need is a targeting system."

Dan and Del Weather were already down from the doorway. Steven had other priorities. "But Commander Blue, our interest is not in creating disasters."

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It only happened like a drum. Steven thought of perhaps like a puzzle that's suddenly straightens. The three heads of technicians had turned from the control screens. They stared at Steven with the incredulity of a man who's just told them they were assassinating the government. The last person with Steven. Anderson and Blue going over the edge. Steve could tell that the other two recruits were confused as well. But they help but be technically impressed and the druggedness of their faces. Each of them one fact, one intuitive leap at a time.

Up before sunrise to see Steven Steve Davis and Tracy Spooner. At the breakfast table, Davis gradually loses his ramble-on garden-variety becoming to insistent. He and one or more of the agents were in the gains bugging the fate of the suns could be [illegible] with the implement of force. With words that sup [illegible] sounded like [illegible] or suggestion the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] secrets [illegible] Steven [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] there

seemed to be an unspoken agreement between the agents and the technicians, as though both parties were following a script.

A targeting system developed over the course of seven and a half months. True to Davis's word, she was provided regularly enough that the scientists never felt as though they were not being watched.

With Stevens unwilling to add through the information and suggestions dragged almost physically out of him over time, a conical transmitter was designed. When three such transmitters targeted the same location from three separate satellites, the weather could be manipulated anywhere on the world. Rain could be augmented or directed. Clouds could be cleared away. At month seven, the transmitters from undisclosed terrestrial locations successfully created a heavy monsoon in Flagstaff, Arizona. The last two weeks were dedicated to making tweaks and modifications to the transmitters. At the end of the seventh and a half month, the system successfully created a massive thunderstorm over Oakland, California, targeted with pinpoint accuracy.

Every day, Steven silently prayed that these spooks didn't already have satellites in orbit. It would be a small matter for one of the units to be switched over to imaging satellite. They didn't occupy much room. Hell, aluminum salt grid that NASA had mothballed the space shuttle program when it had.

Finally, the time came today when the three scientists entered the club to find it empty. Their computers, their equipment, everything had been taken away. Bare tables awaited them, their surfaces scrubbed so clean that they shone. Not so much as a scrap of paper had been left behind. Steven felt a chill.

"Well, I guess they got what they wanted," said Black.

"You don't think they're going to really use this thing, do you?" Steven asked.

"They spent a whole lot of money," said Anderson. "You bet they're going to use it."

"She," said Black. "We don't even know who these people are."

"We know close enough," said Anderson. "Big producer would be my guess, cheap energy costs. Even if they don't intend to use it as a weapon, they're going to use it to shore up their profits. And the

scale these compan[illegible] per[illegible] [illegible] of tampering with the weather. They could cause [illegible] to damage

Like there's [illegible]

The door [illegible] Davis and [illegible] fresh field below white [illegible] [illegible] wooden [illegible] prototype of the targeting system.

Get the [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] offering a toast [illegible] [illegible] to [illegible] and [illegible] you for all your hard work. You [illegible]

You mean [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] Black spat.

Davis [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] wanted to let [illegible] [illegible] Davis reached into a pocket and produced [illegible] [illegible] watch. He tossed [illegible] to Black. It was [illegible] gold [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] Here's your pay. You'll find [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] offered [illegible] [illegible] The [illegible] [illegible] Swiss accounts. The [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] suggest you change the passwords as soon as [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] to be on the safe side. Better [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] should retard [illegible] of the road so [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] Watch [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] out of [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] break those [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] New [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

He didn't confirm it, either," said Steven. "We don't really know who they are."

"They lied to us," she said. "They swore we were going to be helping to save lives. Instead we're going to be helping those bastards make money. Maybe escaping their kill-anybody who gets in their way."

"We don't know that for sure," Steven said.

"Yeah, we pretty much do," she said. "I ought to go to the press."

"Yes," Angela said. Anderson. "Those spooks aren't too far off. You don't want to give them any ideas about us."

"Fuck them."

Cold fear settled in Steven's stomach. "I guess we should split up, then," he said. "Maybe find ourselves places nice and out of the way."

"Why?" Black demanded. "What's there to be afraid of?"

"Lawsuits," Anderson said. "Maybe worse. If we cross them, there's no telling what they could do to us. We just gave them an untrackable weapon."

"Okay, then," said Black. "Let's split up. Change our names. Maybe that's the right idea. But I swear to God, I'm writing a book and I'm exposing these bastards. You mark my words, sooner or later some freak storms are going to start killing some very specific people."

"Then let's disappear," said Steven. "I'd rather not be one of those people."

As they made their brief goodbyes, Steven noticed the head spook, standing in a corner and watching them, one hand pressed to an ear. He looked angry. As Black and Anderson melted into the crowd, Steven felt certain he saw black-suited men following them at a distance. He resolved not to get onto a plane.

Just east of Denver he hitched a ride with a group of hippies who had been camping nearby. Thank God, the kids were driving to Wisconsin. A good remote, unlikely destination.

As the camper rolled on north and east, the heavy rain began to fall.

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Steven ran. Pelted by hailstones which only grew thicker and heavier and dodging flying branches and limbs, he thought back over the past two years.

Weather as a weapon would be perfect for unprincipled spooks. How could anybody prove which disasters were natural, which were

deliberate at home or abroad but the potential for collateral damage was immense. Would he have the courage to realize the potential harm in his work, see that at the start, look for what they really were? Had he missed the boat on that today? Was he sweeping for a character flaw? Now instead of having been, he may have given whatever the people who knew him would think without overlooking their hand.

Twenty months ago Tucson. Heavy rain to date from the tornado was over two hundred mm. A certain hundred and had been preparing to run for president for a platform that included environmental protection.

Fifteen months ago Annapolis Maryland. The death toll from hurricane Irene was almost four hundred. Nobody noteworthy had died or at least with Steven had expected. Letter with no return address. Only a sheet of paper inside. ANDERSON DEAD IN ANNAPOLIS BLACK. Steven had a file reserved. Richard Anderson had died when the wind had blown down the brownstone he was living in under an assumed name.

Eighteen months ago Bangladesh. Morning. A hundred dead but the death toll had included nearly a thousand cattle. Democrats Against GMO were a group. The tornado was directly through an IDAG's headquarters. Long shot suspect. Lyndon Watts.

Twenty months ago Portland Vermont. A hundred and twenty dead and the first spike in the Angel case for responsible. Climate [illegible] Derek Watts. Watts's small cape cod house had been blown away by the heavy winds and his body was never recovered.

Seven months ago Mexico City. Five hundred dead. A twister bigger than anything that size had been before. Among the dead was a retired schoolteacher named Alexis Bloom. A woman whose week later turned out to be the stepmother of Angela Black. Steven wondered if she had ever finished her book.

Where was Steven? Steven did not bring himself to mind. He knew they were out there waiting for him, though he'd felt that he'd been relieved of duty. [illegible] that was now related to its [illegible] and accelerated over the profits and prospects of the big GMO producers' corporations which Steven had begun to own, based on Black's information. Weather in poor areas of the globe had gotten worse and worse and extreme

weather events had grown increasingly common while average temperatures had risen dramatically. Tornadoes had taken their toll on the people we cared about. Even now, Grandpa Joe's storm radio still looked like someone was pounding it from the inside. Everyone's electricity was deteriorating, as a result.

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Steven sprinted toward the tower. He could feel blood pounding over his face from the cut. As he crested the first incline of the levee, he was slowing, bringing his deep gait to the water that seemed to rise and fall in response to the storm's approach to the tower. The wind had also picked up. Steven knew that he was about to see a wall of water. Around him, many of the branches and almost all of the leaves had been stripped away. He had never seen the Sip Road this empty. He turned toward the Grace Street Bridge, which he had just crossed, and ran as fast as he could, trying to avoid being washed away. He dashed for what remained of a public building he might enter. Two weeks ago, there would have been a crowd of people on the porch of the library, but now there was only the shrilling of the storm sirens.

He saw Grace Street ahead of him, now a wide but building river. Its normally green water was a dirty brown. He waded up to the front door and tried it. It yielded, swinging inward. He stepped out of the wind and the blistering hail, into the darkened marble lobby, splashing through knee-deep water.

A row of people huddled in the corner. Seven women and children shivered in the darkness, soaking wet. Watching. Steven entered, shaking off the rain and coming to the side of his Angel Mendez. Steven's mother stood with Hendy, gave him a tight, tapped nervous smile. Dr. Bates, who must've got the phone call picked up from work, was comforting a small boy and girl. Steven assumed was his daughter, and waved.

A man in the corner stood up and the room fell silent. He cleared his throat, looked around, then sat back down. Everyone stared at him for a moment, then, when it became clear he had no more to say, everyone looked away. The tornado warning stood. There were two twisters swirling south of the town, and one was expected to hit Grace Street.

Steven stepped over and took the sight of it. Steven turned them over. Yes, just as he suspected. Both sides of the sight. He ran his eyes over the road. Maybe it was a trick of the light, but it looked as

house far enough outside of Tambo that these people weren't mad. He gave Angel and Emma a look and walked back toward the door of the grocery.

A boom sounded and a big metal sign spun through the air in the rain and mud. As Steve peered around the corner, his attention froze on him. He looked up at the water about his knees just in time to see a tidal wave of raging water bearing down on the town, carrying trees, cars and trucks. The front windows of the grocery imploded as the wall of water slammed into the building, crushing it and washing every soul away.

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The land had gotten flat and then gotten low. There were some hills and even some cliffs and rock outcroppings sticking out from the large sandy areas, which I was more or less used to. I'd left Death Valley and the sand behind a couple of times. I knew what a desert was. It was places where there was little or no water to be found and not much could grow. That was a fitting image for these times. I would drive through endless wastelands of the world. Death Valley didn't seem to be a distinct thing in the grand scheme. It was just hotter.

I rounded a corner, hoping to see a sign telling me how many miles it was to the next town, but there was only a long, straight stretch of road. I'd been driving for about ten hours and I had no idea where I was. Maybe Arizona or something like that. I had no paper maps. Why would I? Who taught me how to read them? When the roads started to change, I'd stop at a gas station and ask someone where I was. Or I'd look for a sign. But there was nothing. Not a car, not a truck, not a person. Just me and the sun and the sand and the heat. Not even a bird or a cactus. Just flat, empty desert. Or something.

Ahead of me I saw them. Two motorbikes were parked on the shoulder of the road. Two guys were standing beside them, crowbars in hand. They looked like they were waiting for me.

This was too easy.

I stuck a hand out the window and fired two shots. Then I held my Remington out the window and fired both barrels back as quickly as I could. I'd never practiced shooting and reloading on the run, but I figured I could take a couple of shots at them before they got close enough to do anything. I'd have to reload quickly, though. I'd only had time to grab a few shells from the box in the back seat. I'd left the rest of the ammo in the trunk. I'd have to stop and get out to get to it. I'd have to reload quickly and get back in the car

Flagstaff for my bounty. Resting the butt of the rifle against my hip I stood forward. I leaned against the cliff wall, using a big boulder as both rest and shelter, and I drew a bead on one of the bandidos. My cheroot gripped in my teeth, the sweet smoke relaxing me.

I squeezed off a shot and the first man down went down with a bullet in his head. The other three jumped and scrambled, and they pulled out pistols. Two of them took shots at me, but those ricocheted off the boulder. I got off another shot and a second bandido went down. The one wasn't clean as I like the first had been, but he'd been moving fast, and I'd gut-shot him. Out here on the Llano, fur-them-critters and the barbs that was all I burned for, a few hours dying. Well, it served him right.

One of the bandidos stopped firing his pistol at me while the other, the one from the photograph, hauled on the handle of his crowbar. There was a screech audible above the popping of the pistols, and a section of the cliff opened like a door. My bogeymen ran in.

I leaped out from behind my boulder and charged after them. When I drew near the bodies, I stopped beside the one I'd gut-shot. He was a gut-going gringo, barrel-chested, balding. Looked like a Euro to me. He was lying on his back, clutching at his belly. Blood covered his hand and leaked the corners of his mouth and flowed out, pooling around him on the white canvas of the Llano, staining it a deep red. His pistol, a revolver, with a long barrel, was a meter and a half away from him, out of his reach. Chewing the end of my cheroot I drew my automatic, Sadie, and put him down with a bullet between the eyes. Then I replaced the bullet from one of my bandoleers and holstered her.

The door was ajar. I followed the bandidos inside.

It was cool in there and dark. Beyond cool. Really. Much like Maybe 16°C or 17°C. The smoke from my cheroot hung heavy in the air. The walls were smooth and white with patches of black mold. On one wall was painted a crude, orange rectangle with a long, green, cactus-like plant in it. It looked like something a nine-year-old might draw. Beneath it was a word, partially covered by the black mold. I could read part of it: ...santo.

I had my Remington in my left hand, the rifle's butt resting against my hip, my right hand ready to draw Sadie if I should need to. Ahead of me, through one door stood open, black mold obscuring

whatever was written there. The door opened inward, so I would not be able to hide behind it. No matter. I moved to the two men. Their voices hesitated, and I knew both of the speakers I was tracking were inside. Even from where I was behind them, I could tell when I didn't see them both straight off. I stepped as quietly as I could to the edge of the door jamb, then stepped around it.

The two men were standing in the center of the room with their backs turned. Facing toward me, Vic Harris was holding a revolver on someone. Hearing me, he began to turn. His eyes widened as he saw me, and he looked like he was looking into the face of Gore himself.

I took the span drawn on his pistol in. He got off a shot, but it went where it was going before he had pulled the trigger. He had taken off the top of his head.

Sadie never even drew. One more male machacho down. I relaxed a puff of smoke from my chest.

My body count was up to nine. Wow. I was astonished. I couldn't draw a pistol. His eyes went wide, and he looked at me. He looked like he was going to say something. He looked at me and then he looked at Sadie. He looked at me again. He looked at Sadie again. He looked at me again. He looked at Sadie again. He looked at me again. He looked at Sadie again

"Never heard of them."

"The Company would become strong again. Grow more food than you could imagine."

"Tell your pond to Santa," I said, removing the shotgun from my mouth.

He darted toward the door as if I would let him past me. I drew and fired. Sadie and he went down, sprawling on the ground, blood pouring from a hole in his throat. I holstered Sadie and knelt beside him.

"Give the transmitter," he said, his voice raspy and wet from the blood welling up in his mouth. "Take it to your government."

"Sam's not interested in tech," I said.

"They could give it to the Company for all I care," Santos repeated, and the pendant fell.

I picked up the ceramic cone. It was heavy, and it occurred to me there was a switch. I opened that and found that the ceramic was hollow, filled with wiring, with all sorts of tech. Carrying it out of the underground building, I considered. Had the old folks really thought tech was going to save them from the weather? Had they put their hope in this thing?

I didn't know, and I didn't care. It was tech. Tech had gotten us here. Sam said tech was bad, and I believed him. The only tech we needed was my sweet Sadie and my Remington.

It was good to get out into the heat again. I didn't like the cold inside that place, whatever it was. I walked over to my horse and reached into the saddle bag. I pried out three sticks of dynamite. That ought to do the trick.

I jammed one stick as far inside the cone as it would go, dislodging some of the tech in the process. Then I used two pieces of the three sticks to tape the third one to the shotgun barrel.

Then I stepped back and dropped a GPS unit. The blast was going to put a hole in the Trip A Tip, and we would have to come out and fix that.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

to apply to them.

ghetti western?

not nearly enough sleeping

A DOG IN THE WEATHER

by Sarah Smith

Barking squirrels. Hunting season. Something.

The squirrels don't smell right.

[illegible] Master and House that smells like Master and he [illegible] but most [illegible] squirrels looking in at [illegible] Mojo and Master spend most [illegible] time in the woods running squirrels. Master doesn't believe in the Democratic Party, the Republican Party, changing the [illegible] universal health care or any new proposal [illegible] Master [illegible] Well, he [illegible] believe in dog food either, but he believes squirrels so Mojo is definitely OK.

Until now.

Instead of the [illegible] Mojo should smell [illegible] squirrels are not being composed of that evil smell.

And the men don't notice.

"Lookit that," Master says.

Mojo sniffs at a little hole in the snow.

[illegible] squirrels are eating food [illegible] snow. Not squirrel. Friend's [illegible] big hand [illegible] with [illegible] snow, [illegible] smell [illegible] Master pushes his head [illegible] and [illegible] Nuts. Mojo sneezes.

"What the matter, Mojo boy? Want a biscuit?"

Biscuit. Mojo [illegible] biscuit. Mojo loves Uncle George almost as much as he loves Master.

[illegible] press [illegible] the [illegible] Master says. In the snow

"Yeah," Friend George says. "The squirrels digging them down into the ground. What squirrels know that we don't know and I freeze solid. They're smart."

"Squirrels," Master snorts. "Know."

Squirrels now part of Friend George's prophecy. "They been digging caches all over the place. That tell me we're going to have bad weather."

Friend George's man robbie-bean penknife digs into the ground. "See?" Friend George says. "Frozen already."

Master's stomach growls. No good to eat. Mojo stalks frozen leaves. Rabbit. Mojo has crossed only two hours past stumbling to the snow. Mojo. Mojo has seen meat breathing. Has smelt. Good crunching bones.

Mojo hears the whimper but Master doesn't notice.

Squirrels know more than Friend George does. They don't dig up acorns out of those caches. What happens to the rest. Mojo accuses. Squirrels have ceremony with nature.

"Don't you get on me after my truck," Master says.

"Young people. They might as well be back in Mrs. Carmody after the church bean supper."

"Getting warming," Master says. "This look like warming to you?"

"You can't argue intermix with nature," Friend George says. "'T'ain't intelligent, Ed."

"Just because you read a book."

Friend George jumps through the woods. Jump thump. Jump thump. Is very offended. His cane pokes at the ground. Sniffs. Mojo sniffs. Is cane. Looks stick. Smells stick. Smell of farmers. Smell of bone. Like the smell of rakes in sour autumns.

"Soft duff. Good place to sleep. Friend George's cabin good place to sleep. Friend George has biscuits. Mojo usually allowed stool."

"You know how to skin a squirrel," Master says conversationally.

Friend George sniffs.

"Take off the head. Cut paws then soak in water. Skin comes off like a glove. Anyone everybody knows that."

Friend George thumps, accepting the apology.

"Lard 'em with a little bacon."

Bacon!

Still says Friend George we ought get rid of that truck

How come Master says What I both ought get more

Friend George says up to the house when is time that we should be this close to the cold and that and the freezing and the squirrels' smell

You're not in the weather Friend George says and you don't know who's watching Who's out there watching

❖ ❖ ❖

Mojo knows who's watching.

It's been snowing for a week steady Master says Snow white down feathers and on purpose caught in Mojo's tub breath snatching cold When he goes out to shit he shivers the whole time squats in the snow pulls in the stray hairs under his butt then rolls them in a ball to carry back to the Dogasming

And the squirrels watch him.

He runs short circuits in circles of the porch waiting down cold to Ass freezes snow in the spoor he pushes through bristly eyebrows and sees squirrels sometimes more than two sitting on the branches taking the piss out of him

Mojo shuts one eye He runs circles and dashes toward the house.

Weird squirrel points his head lower than his body as he runs toward him, sits, pops the cheek pouches and screeches in Mojo's face

Black round eyes. Poison-berry eyes.

Who's watching?

Squirrels.

❖ ❖ ❖

Every night Master shakes his head at the motion alerts in the windows the snow builds up and he says it's just blowing snow. Mojo looks at them, Master says it's just blowing snow.

Inside the house he tells Friend George it makes him afraid to go out There's no food left in the house and not a lot of wood left to burn

I just can't find it in me Master complains to Friend George

Two dead squirrels and the straw hut they were in Master says "They're hiding out next the soil."

"Sure they've dug tunnel. With a little shovels."

"Come on. Inside. You ignorant old fella."

Moo-oo flows from outside. A gust of snow bursts in my eyes. He shakes his head and blinks.

Friend George sighs with his whole body. "When it's as cold as this, the frog's way down to the bottom of the snow. Under the snowpack. Snow melts, it comes down, melts more once it hits the ground. Once you got six inches of snow on the ground, you got a layer of snow and then a layer of ice over that. The snow at the bottom stays just about freezing, no matter how cold it gets. The warmest climate. That's where the mice go to live, and the squirrels. You can see the tunnels when the snowpack melts, and they look like snakes in the snow."

"You been readin' again."

Subscription. It's what raises walruses. Friend George says. "You ought to be more intrigued about how your world works."

"It's snow causes avalanches," Master says.

Friend George gets down on the snowplow light and digs around in the snow. Moo-oo flounders through the drifts, sinking deeper and deeper, and he has to bicycle his legs and swim in the snow to keep from sinking entirely out of sight.

"Too deep for you, Moo-oo." Friend George says, scoops him up. Moo-oo settles down against Friend George's parka like a sack of sofa cushion. Warm.

"Biscuit?" Friend George says.

Biscuit!

❖ ❖ ❖

Six weeks of snow. Snow is piled up dark against the windows. Master sits in front of the TV in the dark in the middle of the day with a six-pack of beer.

"Damn," Master says. "That's what's causing this snow."

Moo-oo peers up through his eyebrows, trying to look intelligent.

"No bright lights in the sky," Master says. "Not kidnapping anybody like we did to those folks over to Exeter. Just snow," Master says. "Making it snow."

Outside, somebody's clearing their throat. Warming. Master clumps to the door and yells a program about how it's

Wonder what the [illegible] Master must [illegible] Things that use snow. Big white [illegible] Invisible. Invisibly white. Master knows it. We been invaded by yeti."

Master [illegible] all Master's back under me's ta quivering

[illegible] Master [illegible] thing's [illegible] gobs. Armor. [illegible]

Aliens.

Master's absolute [illegible] might run up on the forbidden sofa cushions.

Bears? Yeti, whatever that is?

Mojo doesn't think so.

[illegible] all over the yard down at street [illegible] nose. Garbage all over the yard.

World [illegible]

Bin bears [illegible]

Aliens *that wouldn't be noticed,* now…

Master is right.

The world is being invaded.

By squirrels.

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[illegible] Master [illegible] Mojo [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] right. Mojo [illegible] [illegible] Master's [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] on his paws, farting and whining.

[illegible] Master has been [illegible] [illegible] get caught.

Aliens.

[illegible] dog food. Master doesn't [illegible] [illegible] with both.

Master [illegible] [illegible] door [illegible] Master [illegible] [illegible]

the snow with the snow shovel. Bats at snowflakes like they were flies.

Loud pawsteps dear. Mojo roars inside. Even the inside of the house smells. Master unsprung a drunken fart from the sofa cushions. Mojo sighs on the floor.

He hears beasts and dreams. He's chasing escaped dreaming of catching one. Dreaming of crunching rabbit bones cracking fat *meat*, but the rabbit's squirrel. It's round and begins to chase him. It's a huge squirrel, squeaking *meat, meat!*

Do squirrels eat dogs?

Alien squirrels do.

Later, Master is digging. Friend George arrives, on whispering skis, leaning heavily on the ski pole.

"Well, well," Friend George stops over the wind. "What's it look like?"

"I don't know how you're ever get that tesseract going. Radios saying for everyone to get out of the country roads to come into town. The county's not plowing the main roads no more. Barely plowing the highway."

"How'd you get here? Your truck running?"

Friend George gestures. "How you think I got in? Left my truck on the highway and I cussed it every step. Come here to get you out of this. Get your undies together and let's go."

"Just gotta to the grocery store then I'll be coming back."

"Don't even think of it. Side roads are bad. Is up to the cows' shoulders out there. I'd like to know you have driven off the road in it, but you got to get back. Things is going to get worse and you don't want to be alone."

"I got Mojo."

"You bring Mojo. Don't leave him here."

Master whistles, gets his attention, shows him the old sled from the mudroom. "Come on, fool dog."

"What you want with that sled?" Friend George says.

"I'm coming back. Master says. I'm getting my groceries. And my beer."

Outside, he loves the cold snow stings into Mojo's eyes. Snow weighs down his ears. Mojo's tail sets snow over his head.

everywhere. Colder'n dold. H[illegible] sinks, chokes in snow

"Put him in your pack, Ed."

Ain't going to put a dog in my pack.

"Gimme the pack, then."

Friend George pass[illegible] Master puts him in the backpack. Moon yikes, uncomfortable but then quiets as the wind and white. Friend George's back is warm. Friend George's back is warm.

[illegible] to your own dog, Ed. Master grumbles. George grimms that pack'll be strong enough for a strong man or dog.

Dog'll be stronger than man. Don't like cold.

Master's cold so much he [illegible] the trees with the truck. Friend George's truck's warm to the touch as [illegible] mouse fur, feathers, smell of burnt sage. Moon yikes but quiets as the wind the two men, safe from squirrels.

Friend George [illegible] start to walk instead of [illegible]

Dang, George, you're getting old enough to eat kids, do you?"

"Yup."

"Fool an' his money are soon parted."

George [illegible] and [illegible] hug wriggles and [illegible]

You're sure you don't want to put some of the dogs in it?

Friend George doesn't say anything.

Helps keep [illegible]

"Yup."

Gonna be cold as [illegible]

Neither of them says anything.

You're good, Ed. [illegible] Master says.

Ain't going to talk to you [illegible]

My [illegible] you're right. You're going to be strong, to me," Master says.

George doesn't say anything. Just counts to a hundred.

"It's classic," Master says. "It's *prime*."

Time to change it. Friend George says.

"What about 'em?"

You know how many humans there are on this planet?"

Master considers.

From the beginning of recorded history it took until 1800 to reach a billion people."

George, when you say from the beginning of recorded history I just know you're going to irritate me."

From one billion humans to two billion, took a hundred years. Know how long it took to get from five billion to six? Twelve years. From six billion to seven? Twelve years. When your truck was built I'd say there were *two billion fewer cars* on our planet than there are now."

Not my planet. You come from Alpha Centauri, George.

"You know what I mean, Ed. It's *your* planet. It's the planet seven billion people are ruining. Seven billion people driving gas-guzzlers and SUVs and old trucks that ain't had an oil change since Nixon was young. Seven billion people burning coal and cowpatties and fishing every fish out of the sea. And not even noticing. This could be a good world, so ain't it a shame, Ed?"

Master tilts up his head and nuzzles Friend George comfortingly.

Yeah, good dog. Move, Ed. Things got to change. There are new rules. Real humans, as humans, we got to learn what the eagles and the squirrels know. Master snorts. Eagles know it takes two square miles to feed one eagle. Eagle mama lays two eggs, don't take care of but one, unless there's hunting range to spare. Squirrels bury two nuts and dig up one, so there's acorns for squirrels a hundred years from now. Humans don't think further ahead than their front fender."

I ain't got no kids, Master says. Not as I know of."

But I am. I say it with my whole mind, George says and swallows. His scent goes sharp. You don't think there are folks out there in the stars watching, thinking I could take better care of this planet. Things don't change, humans are going to walk themselves off and those folks'll get their chance."

Aliens, Master says. I know it. Aliens from outer space. It's them causin' all this snow."

Not causing it, Ed, Friend George says sadly.

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Ed and George leave the trailer in a place called Hot Mountains. Mojo sniffs at the base of one of the trees and lifts a leg. Lots of cars smoosh-pleased past the window. Dogs barking out other dogs' windows. The sun is out. It's warm. No one's going out unless they have to.

Master and Ed drive through a gate striking tanks into the Stuff Food. Mojo runs up and down the aisles. Dog food? Biscuit?

No one at the sold seat is using. Mojo whines at the Big Food Man.

Where's the bread, Marvin? Ain't nothing here.

Go on down to the high school with the Big Food Man. I've seen food shipping up there. Bring some kind of bun bread for there and the heatin' oil and the milk."

"Ain't going."

Mojo sniffs the sweet candy by the register. He tears up on his hind paws to get a good smell. Master's treats. But there's no steaks there either.

"Shoo! Get down, you!"

Mojo gets down to all fours but pops up through his eyebrows hoping for a hand-out. There has to be food.

"I got another order of food in the truck," Master says. "Summer people."

Summer people—the Big Food Man says. Aliens?

"Where they do this come from," Master says. "Ask yourself that. Mr. Newing, where he come from."

"New York."

"That's right. And Marvin, you've never known anybody who got ruinely went to New York?"

"Ed, *I* been to New York."

"You *think* you been to New York."

Got tired of everything. Decided to go to New York," the Big Food Man says. Mojo runs down the aisle.

Dog?

"After come eat dog biscuit. Where is the dog food, Marvin?" Master asks.

Biscuit? Dog food?

You know, dog food," Big Food Man says. "Too late, Ed. That's all gone at the high school too, where I'm

"I been telling you," Friend George says. "The highways closed. Ain't no trucks got through for days."

You think I grow dog food in the storeroom out back, Mojo? Big Bad Blood Man says, turning down to pet him. The petting feels sorry. You think I like selling people dog food for them?

No dog food?

You think I'm some kind of liar for a grocer?

The Blood Man is swaying like a tree, and dizzy, Mojo lurches his head against the Blood Man's ankle. There, there.

But no food for a dog?

Mojo's not a dog. Any bad creature would know enough to shun him. But deep in his little mongrel soul is a red splinter of wolf.

There has to be food for a dog.

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Stay in town, Friend George tells Master. Go to the high school with the rest of them."

But Master, your Friend George shouts at him, and Big Blood Man shouts at him, and then Friend George drives him out of town again and drops him and his skinned dog at the end of the road.

You're going to die, Friend George shouts as he drives away.

They almost don't make it back.

Deep in the shelter of the woods, the wind howls, and crashes a predator the size of two bears, with teeth big enough to pierce a little dog's throat right. When the trees thin, it tugs and slaps at Mojo through the backpack, and tries to pull the backpack off. Mojo howls and curses it to leave it, stay away from him, you Master.

Stop pulling my dog, Master barks at them.

Master tugs and struggles, and suddenly Mojo falls, down with a thump into wet cold. The backpack rolls over, pushed by the wind, faster and faster. Mojo shrieks.

What am I going to do with you? Ain't got no food for you! Might as well leave ya here in the woods!"

Master curses Mojo, prays with him, cheers him. Mojo scrabbles at the pack, trying to get at it, escape before it's too late.

Click. Master gasps, and the pack swings up again. The monster has swung it up to take it, and is going to eat him, now, the teeth, now.

Long after [illegible] Master is home. Mojo shudders, just about to be eaten.

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"We'll trap us some squirrels," Master says. "Set out deer [illegible]."

It does not stop snowing. Master opens the front door. The windows are dark with snow. Master pushes open the mudroom door, forces his way out. Master returns, shivers, says it's the snow keeps falling.

Mojo wanders over the room, pees, his mouth panting, the trunks between the wood stove. He scratches at his stomach, cold and shivery. He barks for food.

I got me some peanut butter crackers," Master says. He scatters something from a jar over the snow. "Squirrels sure like tree bark. I seen 'em eat it. They come to peanut butter."

Squirrels. Mojo wonders what they taste like.

"Gonna be some right fine eating. Gravy and mashed taters. Squirrels in the pot, right, Mojo?"

Squirrels in the pot, right, Mojo? He's hungry. His stomach hurts.

[illegible] Dark [illegible] stirring [illegible] trees.

Squirrels. Maybe [illegible] squirrels. Cold. Frozen hands. Mojo's head [illegible].

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Master comes [illegible] with [illegible] the stove [illegible]. Mojo can't feel his paws. Wet. Cold. Pain. Mojo's tired and it's so hard to move.

So hungry.

"There's squirrel." Master [illegible] white and he says, "No, just my eyes."

Mojo moans. Coooold.

We'll go hunt [illegible] Master [illegible]. Mojo [illegible]. Meat, boy."

Mojo gets up. Thinks about. Never [illegible] to keep warm. Meat. Meat.

Master gives a shovel instead of his gun. "Get a mountain lion, subdue it. Gotta eat you, I guess, old dog."

As Master carries Mojo across the clearing he stops, picks up the deserted peanuts, puts them carefully into his mouth. He chews slowly.

The snow rises up hardly around them, playing with its food before it eats it.

The woods are dead quiet. In a sheltered group of trees Master puts Mojo down.

"Tell me where to dig, boy. Squirrel?"

Squirrel. Not a big one but the cold snow. Mojo sniffs helplessly over the ground. His nose is blocked and frozen.

Master digs away through the crusty frozen snow down into the ice. Long snakes of snow wriggle through the ice.

Squirrels, Master says and digs further. Dig with me, Mojo.

Mojo digs until he sneezes, puts some hair tarry curled up.

"Oh," says Master.

Master lifts out the squirrel. Nothing but fur, skin, bushy tail curled around starved dead bones.

No squirrels, Mojo thinks.

No aliens.

But no squirrels. No meat.

Just the cold.

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That night the TV goes dark. The refrigerator hum stops.

Don't matter, says Master. Don't it, Mojo?

Master loads his gun. No more. Mojo whines, shaking. Not into the cold. Not any more.

Mojo's not going to take us alive. Ain't going to starve us either. We'll go out in a moment, will it, Master says. Come on, Mojo. Ain't going to leave you behind."

Mojo backs into the dark below the table.

The gun goes off. Mojo whines with fright.

The gun goes off again.

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A long time afterward Mojo creeps out from under the sofa.

The room is full of gun-smell and blood.

Master is lying on the floor. Mojo pattens him, sniffs, crawls over paw by paw, and licks his hand.

Master's hand is cold.

Master smells like blood.

Mojo stuffs a scrap of the bear meat in his mouth and howls.

The howl is a question and a confession and a prayer, of a three-dog pack alone.

But mixed in is a splinter of wolf's blood. Because the bear is so delicious and Mojo is old and large.

There has to be food for a dog.

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Under the weight of snow, the pole sags, groans, and squeaks and then cracks and tears as it tips away from the house and the house sags and falls in one corner.

Mojo and his not-Master eat as much bear *meat* please just *meat* as they can in the other corner sheltered and insulated under feet of snow.

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And then Friend George comes back.

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The first thing Mojo hears is a voice, a tiny yipping voice.

"Is the whole world ours?"

"Not yet," a deep voice says.

"Not even Friend George's territory? Some are still alive farther south."

"That won't last."

"Why not? I'm very intelligent," George says.

"It looks" [illegible] "like *Model* C or did you Integrate Don't make me laugh."

"They were—"

"But how can pay [illegible] how much heat to keep to support one of them?"

"I have my own and when I grow up" the yipping voice says.

"You will, and you'll eat it, and that is the end of it."

"But the good [illegible] asks. That's what I want to know."

We will not [illegible] Friend George says.

Eat. Mojo whimpers in shame.

"What was that?"

The [illegible] snow dances through the clouds. Three tall [illegible] shapes stand [illegible]. One of them smells [illegible] and George. One of them whirls and flows like [illegible] of mud shadow over the snow like a pack of [illegible].

Squirrels?

Flat-smelling, strange-smelling squirrels.

Mojo [illegible] Friend George presses his cheek up [illegible] huge dark leather pained [illegible] and Friend George clasps [illegible] furred arms and Friend George's huge wings fold down around him. Smell of turkey feathers with a fog bed warmer. Mojo struggles down.

"I [illegible] the mud. He [illegible] wrong. I tested ways. They were the wrong ways, that's all."

He would have shot you if you showed your real face to him in your true shape. A long, muffling nose like an elephant snuffs through wing-feathers at Mojo's head.

"It's all right, Mojie," Friend George says.

"Do you know what [illegible] not intelligent?" the deep voice asks.

"Um—" says the little piping voice.

"Intelligent being," Friend George says. His fingers [illegible] Mojo's fur. "An intelligent being knows when to be loyal, and [illegible] the best. But [illegible] intelligent being also knows when to be ruthless with its own desires and its own preconceptions. Some of the humans have survived. They will learn."

"You think," the deep voice mutters.

Someday they will [illegible] the stars, too." Friend George goes on. "And if they are ruthless enough to be intelligent, ruthless enough with themselves to shift [illegible] resources [illegible] they will join us. Maybe they will capture starships sooner. Because every young [illegible] is intelligent wants to voyage," Friend George says. "That is the true intelligence. Young One remembers that. Not intelligent beings stay on one world forever. They [illegible] and [illegible] but remember: we belong to the stars."

"[illegible] Cousin," the deep voice says. "And [illegible] not intelligent?"

'Then' Friend George says [illegible] new maybe. His fingers caress the ser[illegible] spot behind Mojo's ear. Mojo gives a pleasure. "Maybe pets."

Or hors[illegible] the deep sea [illegible] feat meat is delicious."

Remember how that work[illegible] Fortune Cookie Mojo. Friend George says 'I have something for you.'

Biscuit Mojo [illegible] Friend George's fingers.

Maybe he [illegible] best [illegible] deep sea says.

Mojo [illegible] the [illegible] [illegible] happiness [illegible] growing [illegible] Biscuit [illegible] George [illegible] right now.

Maybe [illegible] process. But [illegible]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Like the Buddhist [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

ANTIKHTHON

by Paul Di Filippo

Do some people die too young?

My name is Perry Fairbrother. I'm forty-one years old, and I've never had much success. Though I've also never had much failure. I've worked hard at achieving things and doing right and generally being a good person. Objectively speaking, I'm smart and ambitious. I put myself through MIT with a series of low-wage, hot-extraction jobs on campus. A couple of years after graduation I tired of working for other firms. I founded a start-up that produced photosensitive electrochromic polymers, and I made quite a bit of money.

Not a fortune. Not enough to live off the interest and be independently wealthy. But enough to be comfortable. Enough to feel as if I'd just missed out on the big time. Enough to make me worried about people who envy my type of aggressive, thrusting, forward-looking mode of existence. Enough to make me suspicious.

All sounds great, right?

But a life of wants and needs is a deeply flawed one. And from what I've seen, it seems as if there's a finite amount of bitterness in people, gone unexpectedly bad or just plain bitter. In such dispositions, malevolent gods delight. I've come to feel as if unpredictable, mischievous gods throughout myth always with shattering impact.

So, at times, it seems as if I've striven to keep the best and biggest people whom I love away from me.

I guess the first such instance happened to my number one child hood friend Doug Cardoso was the smartest kid in Mrs. Santacroce's fifth grade class. We played Star Wars miniature battles together by the hour. He lived across the street from me. His mother served us delicious Portuguese sweet bread and chocolate milk. Then one day he was simply gone. Vanished just like that, presumably abducted as we were home and the corner grocery store. Amber Alerts went out but Doug was never found. Not a trace of his existence. The Cardosos were broken, and moved away.

He wasn't the last but even closer to home when I was just fifteen. My friend Sara was a victim of some very sprightly and fun but most unfortunate behavior when her hyped parasympathetic glands began to experience severe depression. There was no real explanation for it. One night she went to bed as she had a million times before and the next morning she woke up a different grammatically correct person as if she had been in that state for years. I had gone to sleep with a girl who was kept

When her symptoms were recognized, her essentially was convinced to undergo various treatments and drug regimens but nothing seemed to help and she lived almost six months like that. During this confusing regimen her family made some very bad decisions at the company he helmed that drove a floor wax, lamberva'd at business and bankrupted and then stood watch as Sara broke. My mom, Emily, whom everyone called Sunny and who had loved her husband very, very much, did not cut him back. She never expected her to bounce back but her family never discussed the [illegible] openly and exported and she just wasted away.

In the face of these incidents Mr. freshman roommate was a bit of an overachiever. Being Sanderling. Hyper intense and generally cheerful. We clicked right from our first meeting though we didn't play Star Wars or Doom at all. I was Reed Richards. As things turned out that might have been too close to the truth. Sara slipped out in second semester to be [illegible] and schizophrenic. Apparently such changes often happen when they're born at the end of the year. He took time off to deal with the [illegible] of several [illegible] struggles. Luckily he'd served [illegible] he landed his [illegible] arriving Red Line car at Kendall Station.

And then there was Gemma. Gemma Caldwell went to [illegible] Boston. She was gorgeous, with [illegible] hair and a [illegible] compact plump [illegible] and [illegible] Wednesday. She had [illegible] and all the [illegible] shed be restored to [illegible]

We met at the Fourth of July [illegible] Hatch shell on the Esplanade. [illegible] together. I [illegible] the edge of [illegible] and [illegible] out cocoa. We [illegible] and we spent most [illegible] few dates [illegible] Boston [illegible] Would [illegible] really liked [illegible] know she was [illegible] love of my [illegible] and be together forever.

We [illegible] were together just [illegible] And partway [illegible]

In the best of my [illegible] had a [illegible] smoked a joint before. We [illegible] experiments with shooting up. I [illegible] couldnt speak [illegible] make any sense.

"Gemma, but why?"

She gave [illegible] the strangest [illegible] Antichrist. I had never heard [illegible] Don't [illegible]

We [illegible] and [illegible] That's why I [illegible] when I [illegible] dead from [illegible] and [illegible] began to weep and then [illegible]

[illegible] Douglas Boston. [illegible] But after some [illegible] and some [illegible] from my life and [illegible]

But still [illegible] such tragedy awaited [illegible]

tentative edge to them, as if I continued to fear that the people I loved could be whipped away from me at a moment's notice.

And these deaths led me often to speculate how my life would have gone differently if these people hadn't been stolen from me. How these lost ones themselves would have experienced the days they were denied. How these special people might have contributed to the world. Sometimes it seemed as if I could catch a vision out of the corner of my eye of my parents and the others suddenly laughing and happy. Sometimes these glimmering phantoms seemed almost more real and authentic than my actual timeline.

I guess it must be partly attributable to these fantasies and speculations was why I did not have an instant heart attack and drop dead myself the day Gemma showed up on my doorstep.

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My business card read Director, Sun, occupied a modest number of modern buildings set off Route 128 in Waltham, Massachusetts, synergistic nomenclature for several other high tech firms. My house was in Lincoln, a tony bedroom community just fifteen minutes away. I had a domestic cleaning firm at once a week, but otherwise it was just me in the over-large house most of the time, mostly due to my tenuous relationships with others, including potential lovers. But that luxury was an indulgence I encouraged myself not to feel too guilty about.

So when the doorbell kept ringing insistently at six a.m. after me just getting home from the office overstimulated at midnight and not having slept until two, I rolled groggily out of an unshared bed and stumbled, bare-chested and bare-footed but decently pajama bottomed, to the door, thinking only *Who the hell wants up in person these days instead of texting?*

I was to pretty soon learn this was no criminal interruption. The last home invasion in Lincoln had occurred around the time the first Bush was President. This visitor was probably some nervy and officious dog walking neighbor looking to tell me a windstorm had brought down a tree limb on my garage roof, something I had noticed last night upon pulling into the driveway.

I opened the door without using the peephole.

The presence of an alien is never seen ever the same as several, as it affects those we see only at long intervals. But of course the

cumulative impacts and transformations of time upon a face a figure a stance a gesture. I drew the exterior of the house, and I knew from sense memory to the exact small scale of unnoticed changes.

The wrought-iron front steps were taller than I knew. I saw the cracked and broken tiles from which I'd once scraped the soil in the place I'd never could recall—

the boy Erik had changed to Peter with the most casual blend of words, affection, pride and guilt. All I said was "Peter." But that was enough.

I already sensed that I gave a start at this revelation. But I did not fall. I was not forced to turn around and stagger backwards. Next thing I knew the impossible, irrelevant dilemma was aside the fact, for me in my terms, that the boy Peter was youthful body now but my old age could breathe the patterns of sweet years ago was both odd and familiar. I guessed I must have felt this in the way that I suspected I didn't think the young Peter would have ridiculed.

When we were young, I managed somehow not to say the supremely obvious. You're dead. I said, "Tell me how. No, scratch that. Tell me why!"

Peter stepped forward, right on cue. "We have to run. You're in danger."

"What kind of danger?"

"Your daughter is coming for you. Once she's here, you and drop in on an ambush, and you'll get your chance for any of us to save things."

"Save things? What things?"

Peter urged me, "Oh, we're quick. Get dressed."

I was torn on whether to dress first. Stalling, I got my phone and wallet. I followed Peter into the foyer. It was immaculate and I was struck by the instants of some boyish talk

I looked around for what I could put together here, but saw none. So I started toward my own Lexus.

Peter stretched out his hand to stop me. "No, not that. Where we're going, we're better off on foot. We don't want to alert Antikhthon. If he catches your scent, or you, he won't dare insert your double yet."

Antichthon. What or where is Antichthon?"

You might know it better as Counter Earth, the mirror planet always opposite Earth on the far side of the Sun. It's where we've been for twenty years now. But we must hurry."

I dropped down to the tracks. "Grandma, this ole boy's gone for enough. I don't know what's up to what, but I can't even be sure now that you're really my Grandma Caldevel, whose aching body I lifted off the couch two decades ago. But one thing I am sure of: there's no such place as Counter Earth. It's a physical impossibility."

Gemma shook her head. "Always the Cartesian skeptic. Perry. But this time you're wrong. Antichthon exists."

"And how are we going to get there? I don't see your rocket ship handy."

Gemma took out of her pocket a strange looking, gnarly cell phone. The screen showed several colorful icons for various apps I did not recognize.

"We're going to boom tube. I'm invoking one now. If you're ready."

Gemma's fingers flew over the touch screen.

The vast mountain peaks and valleys of Olympus Mons swarmed and I was looking at a hovering, ambient portal opening onto a rugged prairie that was certainly not New England.

"Up we go, Grandma. Don't ever want to see our parents again."

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The landscape of the Antichthon dissident's space is complex but only half a mile below what would have been on Earth's Nine Mile Prairie in Nebraska. On Antichthon, which rotated on a more bulbous, oblong axis, the equator North-South was even more sparsely populated than on Earth, and the rebels could be reasonably confident that their comings and goings in the camouflaged surface entrances would not be observed. Even the Antichthon equivalent of Google Earth satellites might have spotted activity, but there was no regular monitoring here of every square inch of planetary surface and a boring wilderness makes for a tract of low value for spies or government cartographers. As I would learn soon enough, Gemma's very

was directed elsewhere. So I crouched lower in the bushes to avoid any discovery had held.

Could it be possible that my parents had lived? Well, why not, if Gemma had survived? Perhaps she'd managed to replace the Heart Stone and Sword before it was [illegible] so tragically broadcast. Yet I was still puzzled over how and when?

A thousand questions raced through my mind like a fast-moving forest fire.

The elevator doors opened and I saw a tall, muscular man with yellow standing there. He was swinging to get momentum [illegible] like a baseball bat or similar shaft.

Vruuum. He swung it, creating high, [illegible] as he began cracking one of the [illegible] was [illegible] about. *"Vruuum, vruuum, pichkow!"*

I dug a gravel [illegible] and stared [illegible] his [illegible] swings.

"Doug Youngerman of Germantown Quest!"

The guy went motionless, [illegible] down as soon as [illegible] recognized [illegible] knew there was Doug Cardoso.

But instead of being a tall, broad-shouldered [illegible] with a bald, balding guy with [illegible] mustache. Just my luck.

"Doug, you're [illegible]," I panted, [illegible] shoulder. "You moron!"

"You're the moron! I [illegible] you'd run out. I was [illegible] the better fighter."

"Were not!"

"Was too!"

Gemma was [illegible] between us, but [illegible] moment before [illegible] erupting. It [illegible] sounded [illegible] ing scheduled to get [illegible] ped.

"Sure thing," Doug agreed. "Let's go."

The [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] people [illegible] a [illegible] by [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

read my mind—as she had often been able to do when we were lovers—and she just said, "Later."

A man guy with a gray stubble haircut and dressed in black tee shirt and black jeans stood up

I recognized Steve Jobs.

"Welcome, Perry. Please, have a seat."

When Steve Jobs tells you to sit, you sit.

"We're ready to start your orientation," said Jobs.

Every location at the tube had a tablet computer of unknown make and design propped on a stand—perked me up just as it happened to come alive.

Isaac Asimov appeared on the screen's signature retro sideburns and tie. He looked very healthy but much older than when he had died at age seventy-two twenty years ago in the approaching nineties. In that nasal Brooklyn voice familiar from a dozen Earth videos he said, "Welcome to Arcturation' the Coordinating Council and the Paramount Admin thought you might like to hear a little history of the planet now that you're going to live here. And who better to deliver such a precis than that master of popular science, your one and only Good Doctor Oh, what the hell—this public service documentary counts as my seven-hundred-and-fifteenth publication right after *The Robots of Eternity*..."

I won't recount Asimov's exact words nor describe all the impressive visuals that went along with his narration but instead will just give the gist of the situation in which I suddenly found myself involuntarily enrolled (I learned afterwards by the way that Asimov had recorded this orientation speech a few years ago before he finally passed away at age ninety-three in his desktop word processing document on his screen.)

The planet Arcturus's outer Earth had existed on the far side of the Sun for just as long as Earth itself had been swimming through the solar system. In many ways it was a precise duplicate of the world I had grown up on, but several of the planet's salient properties were very different. And these differences were what drove the current situation.

Arcturus featured the exact same landmasses as Earth, the same carbon-nitrogen atmosphere from apparently the same billions of years of evolution as recorded in Arcturus Earth's own fossil

record. Would one important divergence. Humans had never arisen on Antikhthon.

The planet was settled by a number of large spaceships in successive waves from Avalon and Arthurs Earth starting approximately 60,000 years ago. Refugees had been sent to find a replacement world for their destroyed homelands. They immediately constructed shields that would eliminate primates existing from the ancestors of such primitive peoples left behind on Earth might someday devise.

But a subsequent cultural evolutionary period caused the Antikhthonians to lose contact with their mother world for many millennia. And when they were finally ready for technologies and were ready to begin to do with Earth once more, at first only through remote viewing sports but not in person through boom tubes, they discovered something quite unanticipated.

The population of Antikhthon eventually produced doppelgangers of Earth humans. Or reverse. In either case there was a convergence of individuals.

Many people on Earth but not all, given the lesser population of Antikhthon, had ancestors born on Counter Earth.

The scientists on the Antikhthonian ships had tried to explain this phenomenon in advance of their descent to the fields operating at point of view structures that keep the two worlds in synchronization despite the vast differences in separation by the coordinates of Antikhthon and those of Earth due to some unforeseen cosmic shaping factors so to avoid random mating producing identical offspring on both planets.

But what they called the portal effect created subject matter that was challenging human artists on Antikhthon with flawed, warped perspective. The engineers explained why *Homo sapiens* never developed these errors in perspective. The full scientific explanation were beyond even the advanced Antikhthonian theorists but whatever the reason human beings from Antikhthon were subject to errors in perception of the third dimension. Tesseratomas and other experimental deformities of art were unpopular, would surely have meant the downfall of any civilization or society.

Artists took to painting Antikhthonian subject matter with a stunning montage of shining high tower cities appearing towards the horizon

cocktail festivals gleaming laboratories bountiful farmlands rousing sporting events populated with citizens of a classless level of prosperity and advancement museums the world of Antichthon united under a single planetary government the Grand Ruling Council ancients beyond the Barrier Wall was a veritable utopia long lifespans full employment free energy environmental conservation guaranteed income for all at birth absence of war and prejudice

How could this be?

Simple

Antichthon was exporting all the wretched refuse of its teeming shores to Earth and stealing our best people

And they had been doing so for approximately the past five hundred years.

That was why Counter Earth was a paradise and Earth was always teetering on the verge of catastrophic collapse a giant sanitarium-cum-prison-cum-hospice.

Because of their access to surveillance the people of Antichthon could identify potential kidnap victims on Earth who exhibited some combination of traits that would contribute to Counter Earth's wealth and flourishing The authorities had also perfected various predictive algorithms and stochastic models that could identify such individuals even at an early age

A top-of-the-line doppelganger was available to the Antichthonians simply abducted their counterpart If one was available they removed most of his or her memories and implanted enough Terran pseudo-memories to get by for a short time

A short time. That was the operative phrase.

The average doppelganger would soon self-destruct causing greater or lesser traumatic upheaval in the lives of those near and dear to them in the lives of whatever strangers who had had the misfortune to interact with them.

Most would be abducted back to Antichthon would undergo hours of reconditioning and would be returned to Earth to become an integral part of Counter Earth's civilization

In addition to such wrongful kidnappings in the glorious and noble history of Antichthon Zeal like a bizarre version of Earth's crime blotter and hall of infamy.

Boss Tweed Po Pot Richard Nixon Vlad Tepes Stalin Cecil Rhodes Andrew Boring Bruce Jones Holmes Song Hu Ceo Ed Gein Ted Bundy Lizzie Borden Hitler Superbeast Kevin Richter Shiver White Spruce. The list of notables recited by Asimov with their shortcomings was long and all too familiar: people whose only solutions to disputes, failures or economic and social problems had involved almost surely overt violence and social predation were here in Antikhthon having adjusted wonderfully.

The fact that the earth was controlled and by immutable access back to Earth and that the purpose of the *Tau Ceti* was impossible, especially since the victims were shown recorded and live video evidence that the dead spacegangers had crashed and burned, endangering the world below, Earth authorities were convincing incentives to cooperate.

Oh, screw that, Asimov said. And there was a new citizen of Antikhthon. My brief interest in the ethical possibilities situation was over. Now I just wanted to get to the work of doing what was right. Good luck and good luck.

I looked up from my tablet and Vera was watching me to see my reaction. I paused to formulate my words as precisely as possible.

You gave us a lot to digest with this, to understand. I knew she just now as of a would. But our scientific and technological capabilities of exploration, to even to have the means of power. And I suspect be essential to your plans."

I paused, not to let escaped from the dissidents Steve Jobs even smiled before she said. You are right. I'm not going to argue with you. And I think we all have more than enough data to begin my revolutionized world view with a lower risk.

I spoke to the Asimov. You now physically have used logic chip replicators to make the gates to open the problem of reliable communication. Our communications with these vessels will be up to the production rate of the gating capable AIs will be the problem.

This is a good thing, yes. No one can say. Might not ever you can foresee?"

Yes. I will be a good thing, or the best possible happens. The AIs will be pivotal in the development of the most

certain that the superior machine intelligences will also deduce and announce the existence of Antokhthon. And then, as you can imagine, all hell will break loose. I try to visualize how angry Terrans will be when they learn about the centuries-worth of secret trashing of the planet. And so our government is determined to abduct you and thwart your intervention. Or rather, to have you create, for ourselves here and then by use of the overwhelming powers of the AIs to forever cement Earth in its own position. This is the final straw for those of us who have always felt guilty about the treatment of Earth. And a few of us have banded together to stop the plan."

"How?"

Jebs looked a bit crestfallen. "We don't have superior numbers or forces on our side. Almost everyone privileged citizen of Antokhthon is quite happy with the way things are right now. We can't just reveal everything to the general Terran populace without causing the very collapse we hope to prevent. And would we even be believed? We have no media boom tube at our disposal. Suppose we ferreted over some important Earth people. What could we safely show them here in secret to get them caught? A generic underground bunker and a PowerPoint presentation? No, our only chance lies in convincing the Coordinating Council and the Paramount Atlan to reverse their decision and initiate a new, more equitable relationship with Earth."

"Okay. So abducting me buys you some time while the government regroups. But what's your ultimate plan to turn around the bosses?"

Jebs regarded Gesanna with a baton passing look. Gesanna said, "Perry, that involves you too. You see, the Paramount Atlan is Bernie Sanderling."

To say I was stunned was to indulge in the mildest of metaphors. "My old college roommate who went nuts is the leader of the whole planet?"

"More or less. But remember, this is the original good-brilliant Bernie. And we think you're the only one who can sway him. Especially since he's more or less issuing a threat to sacrifice your entire old city. He's onboard with using the cavalier now because he doesn't have to deal with you face to face until you arrive here from Earth as a fait accompli. But if he knew you and talked to

you in person and just v destroying [illegible] on Earth well we think that might make him reconsider. Especially if you plead ins[illegible] Terrible thing. Hes[illegible] pretty good race generally sensible. Anyhow it would be better for everything than destroying we have now."

I stood up in the excess of nervous energy and began pacing the room. He ebbed et[illegible] knowing that was nothing as they could say.

The[illegible] address? How[illegible] I single-handedly divert this vast immemorial world change energies?

I stopped before one of the[illegible] modest seascape paintings on the wall. The artist's signature caught my eye.

ADOLF HITLER, 1955.

I turned back with a very[illegible] appropriate to the conspirators. All right, I'm in. But how are we going to approach[illegible]? Because I trust that most people on Antikhthon don't just walk right in on the[illegible] what chamacallit, the Paramount Atlan."

Gea[illegible] was watching me closely, I had a hard time keeping her eyes fixed on mine.

I forgot[illegible] to see the Paramount Atlan[illegible] Perry.

"I'm his wife."

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Steve Ibbs had said that being beamed out of Earth and shown a genuine underground bunker and a low-point presentation would not[illegible] do a lot of[illegible] to change Quarter Earth and[illegible] to[illegible] Antikhthon. I left behind the meeting room, I regained my[illegible] doubts about the validity of all I had seen. I was longing for a[illegible] moment that might seem so[illegible] weird, desperate and[illegible] to[illegible] Maybe I had never even left Earth...

Do you know what would be really convincing?

Seeing a[illegible] dead people again, the[illegible] five years.

Gea[illegible] brought[illegible] to[illegible] in[illegible] me. I can't recount everything I felt and[illegible] just not possible[illegible] But it was the nonverbal responses of a lost teenager.

After[illegible] feasting on[illegible] glorious[illegible] how good we all look[illegible] to each other[illegible] sorting apart[illegible] there's that[illegible] most

abductees my parents had not been swapped out for any interstellar lifeforms but simply to send me little down the proper course of action that would lead straight to the invention of artificial intelligence according to all the predictive models. Such cold-blooded utilitarianism made these words and I had to remind myself that it had been planned with the former Paramount Atlan long before Perry himself had been kidnapped.

It was all too much for me and I had to say goodbye to my folks all over again.

Dad said to me, "Dad said. We're watching you with all our love from afar to see what adult life can do this. My mother squeezed my hand and I felt communion."

After that there was no good reason why I was going to back out of this, however slim the odds of success.

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I had to say it is much about the dangerous adventure that was likely to end in my demise. Evening cars were just as cool as I had ever imagined.

Cruising above the pleasant residential suburbs surrounding the glittering jewel in the central of the planet I was experiencing a commuter's bliss. Low traffic noise and a soft wind seeking through part-stopped about the distant swelling electrine towers and pleasant small soaring steeples and bridges the strange clothes I had been attracted in. All these contributed to the sensation that I had just stepped into a science fiction movie. I longed to take the steering out of the control but Gen had explained to me why I couldn't.

I was not competent to drive the car. My name was not Peter Fa' brother of Matt Damon Knight our native who was my doppelgänger. And in public I was supposed to be seen as being sedated. This commando operation was to be transacted to transfer from the house where I normally resided.

At least that would be the cover story to explain why the Best Ladies of Arcturion was escorting me into the palace of the Paramount Atlan.

Except that was the one thing that really bothered me about the entire enterprise. I was complicit to the deception, and couldn't help picking at the scab again.

So tell me again Gemma I said and hit me hooked up Was it like a robot or a machine or what

Gemma looked amused at that and I realized it was the first of that aspect that I'd seen Yeah I guess But not so much as you and I trust me that I had developed this sense of humor in image of him And that's why the two I were picked out for after our separate abductions we have a kinship in common But to be honest we just clicked I told him you were Bert and he fell in love with me."

Just like Dr. Doom's daughter St. Storm

"Huh?"

Forget it You're lucky he wasn't the one I wanted for you

You didn't want me You thought I was dead You were just too traumatized to form a proper attachment after my loss Okay, that's a bit of both combination of both, I guess But I was right I'd settled down with Bert and I loved the man And I wish you'd done that with someone else But recent events were going to shatter that Would you want me to do five to ten for twenty years ago on the chance that you might get snatched?"

I said nothing Gemma was absolutely right So I'd done the human thing I was trying to do

"I'm sorry. Maybe after all this is over—"

Gemma cut me off "Let's not go there please Let's just aim to save Earth first."

The rest of our flight passed in strained silence and soon we landed on the tarmac at the airport in front of the governmental palace.

"Remember to drool a little, okay?"

"Never a challenge."

The Elder Council had sent a car to collect us and I stared at Gemma with her powers restored she looked like a different person to the one I'd been with for the past few days Her expression was one of total confidence Gemma had been originally abducted by Aeternus to be his wife and she'd spent the past few decades as one of the royal consorts on Antikythera No wonder she looked at home in the world of power politics and the respect from the guards flowed

We were soon alone in an elevator. But, cognizant of spy rays meant to monitor what happened inside the palace, I kept up my moronic appearance.

More Mutes, the Merciless guards when the elevator arrived at the top floor of the palace. There were six of them behind and were none of the private quarters of the Paramount Army.

Gemma called out, "Bernie. Where are you? I've brought Mutax Pion with me. I think it's time we decided how to insert him on Earth."

In the open archway of an inner door appeared my beloved old pal Bernie Sanderling. I felt an intense pang of kinship. He wore the same otherworldly fashions Gemma and I sported, and his hair was all gray. But otherwise he was still the same slim, intense, laser-focused androgynous whiz with whom I had spent endless challenging hours of conversation.

Bernie regarded the two of us with a smile. Even his voice and manner of speaking were unchanged from yore. "You have Mutax Pion with you? How curious."

Bernie stepped aside, and my leashed duplicate appeared from behind him.

Glad rags, the real Mutax Pion had a matted, filthy beard, bloodshot eyes and crawlike fingernails. It was like looking at myself after a combination of lost weekend and desert island castaway experiences. I had to assume that Antikythonian standards regarding the mentally disturbed were somewhat less than enlightened. Unless his condition had been deliberately exacerbated so that he would self-destruct sooner upon taking my place.

My doppelgänger let forth a growl of frustrated or instinctive hatred and made a tentative lunge in my direction until Bernie chessed him with a small electronic current through his leash that caused him to quail and whimper. I had instant sympathy, almost feeling the jolt myself.

"It's quite nice to see you again after all this time. I assume that Gemma has brought you right up to date with everything and that you are here to help us continue the great tradition of Antikythonian excellence in all matters."

Gemma interrupted in her brash and spoke with resignation. "Don't play with us, Bernie. I'm sure you've read our actions that you know everything."

Bernie nodded with that remembered small smirk that I had to admit I had always found somewhat condescending, however much I would always admit to his rightness.

Yes certainly [illegible] Yet I noticed Hideout was hardly impenetrable to spy [illegible] now to [illegible] them. I was amused by the antics of Otto and Mr. Bs and the others and just wished to see how it [illegible] would go. Not that our weapons [illegible] threat.

I stepped forward and [illegible] dropped [illegible] head back toward me before being admonished again.

I have to ask you [illegible] Bernie, please listen to me. This is [illegible] to undermine my love and [illegible] of our cause. You can't go on [illegible] with this long campaign of injustice as to finally stop."

No [illegible] doesn't. Antikhthon represents all that is fine and good in the universe. The culture is the continuation of a long line of superior beings that [illegible] stood from Mu and Atlantis and Lemuria and [illegible] of our [illegible] have been all destructive. Our continued success is [illegible] from [illegible] bourgeois [illegible] to you [illegible] that is [illegible] that must be preserved.

What can I do to [illegible] achieve [illegible] Bernie?

My old friend paused [illegible] thinking [illegible] then said, Well I suppose we [illegible] control. You and Mutant Hideout shall fight it out and the winner will [illegible] which side gets to win.

Any [illegible] would [illegible] protest. Bernie could protest. Bernie had unleashed the madman on me.

I [illegible] that there was [illegible] protest. But the [illegible] strength [illegible] dopplegangers [illegible] strength. Many muscles of [illegible] bound [illegible] went [illegible] and [illegible] ending to any [illegible] I could [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible] to shriek once. I bellowed twice.

I managed [illegible] to [illegible] grasping three broken fingers [illegible] with [illegible] Address [illegible] from my lacerated scalp [illegible] my mouth. My [illegible] most backed [illegible] kept [illegible] and [illegible] Somehow Bernie and [illegible] Otto Prime back on his leash.

Otto [illegible] regarded [illegible] husband [illegible] with [illegible] contempt. [illegible] her hand she held [illegible] cellphone [illegible] [illegible] for the moment [illegible] app on the screen [illegible] finger poised [illegible] to apply [illegible] over it.

We'd always had a final option, Bernie thought, though we hoped never to use it. But now I see it's the only way. You're behind reason now.

Bernie turned to mention this to Gemma, but she had gone wide-eyed. "Gemma, my dear, don't be absurd...."

Without looking her grandfather in the eye, Gemma said, "Perry, the stairs from the penthouse terrace will lead us to the first floor of the Natural History Museum. Level two from here in the next few minutes."

Perry didn't quite understand what was happening, but figured he should just follow her lead.

He stepped out onto the terrace, then stopped at the glass doors.

"Gemma..."

"I know, Perry, I know. Me too."

He turned and threw off at top speed.

Fifteen minutes later, through the trees, Perry saw the Natural History Museum. Gemma had already crashed from the turbulence when the crystal fell, but now she was starting to regain consciousness.

Perry had overridden the safety precautions and opened the orbital boom tube into the heart of the Sun. Her action had been set in motion, for when the plasma poured through the connection it vaporized the very device that sustained the portal, along with Gemma and Bernie and a million other inhabitants. But the few moments' delay in the destruction of the tube had done what she had intended.

Not only did the cataclysm utterly disrupt the plans of the few surviving members of the Committee, who had been elsewhere, but the resulting flare was observed by Earth. A small solar prominence appeared, so to speak, and the human race was free from the Sun. But its orbital motion caused some excitement back home. By the time the gods convened the Council of the Righteous, the mixing of mud with earth was not expecting such a first contact.

Within seconds, a week of pandemonium ensued. Earth and Antearth had not been prepared. Despite the trash-recommendations of the gods, calm took a long time to return to the combined forces of the world, but sanity looked bright.

I suppose Gemma's second decision was one of the most noble that Bernie took in a way, but that doesn't make it any more or less.

[illegible]

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[illegible] actuarial statistics.

QM

by Allen M. Steele

Who's watching? And why?

I [illegible] from a friend of mine [illegible] If you knew him, [illegible] like with a grain [illegible] and I'm sure don't consider **yourself lucky.**

[illegible] was one of [illegible] and [illegible] [illegible] up [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

and so it was with Jay. He didn't make it through college but instead dropped out midway through his junior year and although he continued living around campus he took the first of many part-time jobs to support himself while he figured out what he wanted to do with his life.

You're getting a sense of how even your twenty-year-olds and considered by certain societies as adults. You might even be able to make it work when you're in your twenties, the millennials have made it festive and most of them aren't mature enough to handle it. But I'm screaming for it when you're in your thirties and you're still working as a cashier at Seven Eleven. The only thing that you needed in order to survive was a paycheck.

Jay could have been many things: doctor, social scientist, professional poker player, CIA analyst, stand-up comedian, or maybe just a burnout like myself. Instead he became a waiter, a mattress store clerk, twice a record store assistant manager, a fork lift operator, a door-to-door vacuum cleaner salesman, a greeter at Wal-Mart and I forget what else. I'd visit him at these jobs for a while and one day he'd just give up and decide that he was bored with whatever he was doing and simply not come to work that day. Within a few days he'd be fired for failure to report in. Whereupon he'd take his final paycheck and use it to get drunk until he found another mindless minimum wage job to pay the rent and buy food.

Eventually, I would discover his old brilliant ambitions, and decide that he wanted a fresh start. So he'd scrape up the money to go back to school and study medicine or law or take out a bank loan and start his own business. He owned a comics store for a while, and this is how I ended up in a novel I read the seventy-seven pages he printed for a minicomic I made and was impressed enough that he sent it to his agent, who would've taken him on as a client except he'd already finished the thing. But sure enough, right up until the moment I'm typing this, he's dropping by unannounced, knocking on my front door, through window and asking me what I've been working on lately. What I've been working on lately is you.

You're probably wondering why I'm telling you all this. Let me tell you. It's so you'll understand what I found standing on my doorstep one summer night when I was just a kid. It was a typically sweltering August evening, warm and sticky, and I was on my way home from

Now I said I was going to tell you what I found, but it's been a while since the last time. What was it you were after here?

That's great. Thanks. That answers a question, but instead I paused to look around. Nothing in sight that didn't seem to satisfy him. "Is anyone around?"

No, not for a while. My wife had gone to St. Louis for a week to visit her family, and the kids were at [illegible]. Massachusetts. Nothing in the yard. A few lightning bugs, maybe, and the frogs from the swamp behind the house. I was all alone. You were in the driveway, so I told you to pull it around back and wait there. I was a little bit worried about the neighbors seeing that car across the front of the property.

Good. A minute or so later, you showed up with a cooler in hand. You stepped past me into the kitchen. I was a mess, as I remember. New England boy, never quite at ease with strangers in my front door. I had to get out of there, and I can't ask the phone

Out of where. I don't recall you told me. I don't even recall where you're from now. Not New Hampshire.

Now I move to Nashville, but that's not it. That would've been the opening, and it's too late for me to be [illegible] manage. I didn't make it to the pass, but I never gave up on that essential involved the [illegible] Stephen Mitchell [illegible] Mitchell [illegible] Burlington [illegible] computer [illegible] Mitchell [illegible] Evening Post

No. Wait. Start at the beginning. Where you're going. Where everything I got bottled with. Start at the beginning.

Seventy-four. No, seventy-three. Big mess. Nothing turned out. I'm not that writer. I'm a writer, writing about writing the story and how it's not coming out right and pulling apart over and over. Between [illegible] and [illegible] completely content to be with him. Sitting on the porch, watching the words drift from his mouth, the [illegible] and [illegible] soda and opened a [illegible] article about them or—"

Nope. Never heard of 'em until just this minute." I carried my beer over to the kitchen table, pausing for a moment to shake out a couple of dog cookies from a jar on the counter. "Why should I?"

Jay didn't answer at once. He took off his cap and settled into a chair across from me, and took a long pull from his Seven Up as he watched the dog gobble up the cookies and barked them. "I kinda thought you might," he said after a moment. "And I guess I'm glad you didn't—because if you did, it would mean that I'm in the wrong place, and that you're..."

His voice trailed off and he looked away. "That I'm what?"

Jay looked back at me again. "This is going to sound paranoid as hell," he said. "You might even think I'm nuts. But you write about this sort of thing—I know, and I thought that if there was anyone who might understand—"

"What's it you want me to understand? *Jay, you just walked away from a perfectly good job.*" I gently added, but didn't say aloud I hoped this wasn't a prelude to asking for more money. I'd loaned him a few hundred bucks over the years and only once had I ever seen it come back.

Maybe he picked up something from my voice, because Jay sat back in his chair and silently regarded me for a moment or two, as if trying to decide whether to level with me. "Okay. I'll tell you the whole thing," he said at last. "I know you won't believe it because I didn't believe it myself. But as rehearsed many times as I can..."

He stopped, took a deep breath, slowly let it out. "And once you hear it," he went on, "you'll never feel the same again."

"Oh, really?"

"Oh, really. Let me explain..."

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When the video arcade job folded—as I suspected it would—Jay had become bored with it and finally tendered his resignation in his usual way: by simply not showing up. He found to his dismay that his options had run out. None of the places where he'd previously worked would give him a recommendation to make matters worse, Nashua is a small enough town that business owners frequently trade such information as the names of unreliable employees. Newly-hired convenience store clerks, mom-and-pop laundries, movie theaters, and warehouses

didn't return his phone calls. Jay could tell that southern New Hampshire's largest city was no longer a workplace for the faint of heart **and began to look further afield.**

Jay had been scanning the newspapers and trade magazines based in Massachusetts, perhaps in the hope of moving back down to the Bay State. The *Boston Globe* and others had a few possibilities, among them was a custodial position at QMI, the ad for which advertised it as being "high tech company in Burlington, a bedroom community just outside Boston." This sounded interesting or at least not as dull as being a retirement home caretaker, so Jay sent in a slightly amiss résumé. He updated his resume, trimmed his beard and dyed it black, as it had turned white by the interview. And of course he got the job. Jay was torn between moving and becoming very good friends with Wang and the gap in his employment record. He rented an apartment, packed up his trusty Lada and started **the following week.**

QMI doesn't look like anything special, at least not from the outside. It's a nondescript, New England office block from the 1980s, a stone's throw from the Burlington Mall and not far from an industrial park off Route 128. Days pass by in a blur of parking lots, "it's like the side…seen one, seen 'em all."

Jay's boss, Bob Buck, who was a business reporter in Worcester, Jay spent more time than he wanted to remember going to press conferences, splits his life between QMI and the ocean, which pulled **the plug on my journalism career.**

Bob had been a sailor for over a long time and is mad about the place. He's a scruffy, dishevelled man with a ruddy complexion and a permanent cigarette dangling from his lips. He's always there when you arrive at the office and you can't get past them. There's nothing but office and boardroom talk over the breakroom table like in most other businesses. Bob's conversation might drift from Jay's wife's dog to QMI to sailing and then to the time he and his friends got stranded on a mountain peak **after sailing their boat too close to the wind.**

When Jay first joined QMI, the company was still known as Quadtek Microwave, but they dropped the "Quadtek" from their trademark a long time ago. Now it's just QMI. They're supposed to be designing and manufacturing operators equipment for the hotter, less stable end of the new scanning

electron microscopes, centrifuges, hyperbaric chambers, stuff like that. They've got a showroom where their products are set up and demonstrated, and you're welcome to come in and look at them. Sometimes you can even take your money and ship you a piece if you put in an order. But in the eight months I worked there, I never saw anyone ever do that. Everything on the ground floor was just for show."

"What do you mean?"

Jo curled her wrists in her sweater sleeves and tucked her hands together to stop the tube. "What I'm telling you is not just window dressing, a facade to disguise what they really do."

Jo had been working at QVI for about six months before his curiosity finally got the better of him. By then he began to notice that the ground floor offices were seldom occupied. Even in the afternoon when he arrived to change into his overalls in the custodial closet, he would rarely run into anyone that he'd been there during the day. The desks were tidy, the trash cans were empty, the rugs were clean. Even in the break room, there was often a pattern of dust on the coffee pot and the milk foot on the vending machine had six months' dirt on it. On the other hand, the reception desk was untidy, with bulging mail trays and a cluttered logbook and the security guard would dash down to the entrance to leave with a first-caption glance at passers-by and passing through an airport-style full-body scanner. Jo didn't have a cell phone, but if he did, he would've had to suspend it at the desk before coming in.

Upstairs was different. Above the deserted ground floor was an enormous room with a floor area, he estimated, to be at least twenty-four hundred square feet. It resembled the war room of a stock market operation, the sort of place where day traders would scream and gesture to persuade their clients to buy shares in pork bellies or tattoos, but the people who worked there looked nothing like scruffy capitalists, and the computer screens they were staring at weren't displaying the latest figures from the New York, London, and Tokyo stock markets.

Instead, they were showing CNN, BBC, Al Jazeera, the network news channels. No matter how you got your news, one common

The grin faded. "But just about everything else we do. At the same time, we're getting support from spy services all over the world from Washington to Rio to Beijing. I'm tapping into public surveillance cameras in Europe and Asia. I've been watching everything for twenty-four-seven. And taking notes."

So what do you do with your spare time? I wanted to ask, but I already knew what another thought occurred to me. And it was what they'd never known about me. "You mean, I don't stop you."

Jay shrugged. "At more or less the same happens when you become invisible. People don't notice you. Unimportant and looking through you. And even cops can't get search warrants signed fast enough to come through, or even to enter bedrooms and rummage around in closets across the floor."

"Is that what QM is? A spy outfit?"

He frowned. "I'm not sure I like that term. It's a little too Seven Up. It's what it used to be, I guess. But now, with the world turning the way it is, I prefer to think of it as a service. That's what I thought we were doing, anyway, or aiming to do, on those lines. But then I saw something that changed that."

Jay put down the tablet and straightened. "The day I decided I saw the president get assassinated."

I stared at him. "Which president? Which one? What country?"

"The president of the United States." Again the grim smile returned. "And I suppose I'm a witness."

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Jay was on the second floor of a building that overlooked Pennsylvania Avenue, between the White House and the Capitol. He was in a room that had been set up as a temporary office, with a desk and chair on one side of the room and a sofa and armchair on the other. A wide-screen TV was on the wall behind the desk, and Jay was watching it when I dropped my bombshell. He'd been flicking through the channels, switched the screen to what turned out to be CNN. And it was through that I watched what had happened. The president was on a podium at a fund-raiser in Chicago, and was waving to the crowd when a man—the guy, a member of a right-wing militia group no one had ever heard of before—climbed onto the stage, jumped the Secret Service

him at point blank range. The Secret Service guys threw POTUS into the vehicle and tore outta there, but it was pretty obvious that the president was dead before he hit the ground."

I shook my head. "That didn't happen. The president's still alive. There wasn't even an attempt. You know that."

"Sure I do, but I didn't at the time. While it was happening, I was standing in the back of the room with a trishear in my hand looking over everyone's shoulders and not believing what I was seeing, but I had hardly any doubt that the president was dead when I saw some changes start happen. The room calmed down a hair, and the people there…well, they intervened."

"They…what?"

"That's what they call it. An intervention. Changing something that just happened so there's a different result. While I watched some medical staff took apart the Portal, which I think is somewhere in Tennessee—"

"That's my home state."

"I know. I've been to a place called McMinnville?" I nodded. "The Portal is outside of town. From what I've learned, it appears to be located somewhere underground."

That sounded plausible. There's a major cave system in the area. Cumberland Caverns is the most visible part of it, but it extends all the way up to Kentucky. If you're going to build an underground facility, such as the Confederate army did when they operated a saltpeter mine for their gunpowder supply, that would be the place to do it.

"So they mobilized something they called a 'crisis intervention team.'" He snorted when I raised an eyebrow. "Yeah, I know what that sounds like, and they sent it down to Tennessee and…well, they fixed it."

"*Fixed* it?"

"All I know is, when I stepped out of there and got out to the building, the first thing I did was get in my car and turn on the radio, and there was nothing. No breaking news stories to talk about it whatsoever. I drove straight home and spent the next couple of hours checking the DVR recordings and surfing the net. Yeah, the president went to Chicago for a fundraiser, but he was already back in Washington by the time I turned on the TV. Not even a hint of trouble."

"Then it was a test. Some sort of simulation."

"No, that's not to say there aren't [illegible] going on. It's the reason the [illegible] and [illegible] group began to pace the room. "We've been [illegible] them and I think I know what they're doing. QM theorems, quantum mechanics, and they're reshaping history."

"Okaaaay…"

"No, no. No, no. I'm not watching everything that goes on in the world. I'm not [illegible] and there's something that upsets [illegible] some [illegible] there is the [illegible] to step in and set it straight."

"So you're saying that in the past someone came back in time to prevent the assassination from succeeding, and that's why no one ever heard about it?"

"Exactly. There's [illegible] stuff like that going back and changing history after it happens."

Nonetheless, I was tempted to fish the morning paper out of the recycling bin to see if it reported a story about an explosion at a [illegible] factory, or whether there was a fire that had snuffed out a couple of hundred lives.

Jo must have read my skeptical doubt on my face because she quickly added, "I don't think it works quite the way you'd think. The [illegible] thing I don't think every single thing that happens is [illegible] important in the sense that we're looking for stuff that has lasting, long-term consequences. And I'm another I've seen [illegible] not paying attention to [illegible] but many."

"How many?"

"I have no idea. But when I [illegible] over there [illegible] the [illegible] when the [illegible] was [illegible] but there was [illegible] to [illegible] of [illegible] know it. [illegible] Goddess [illegible] over the ocean. Victory [illegible] of Hera [illegible] at the Louvre. [illegible] during [illegible] was [illegible]. He [illegible] I've seen based on the Voorhees Mansion [illegible]. Some of [illegible] stuff of yours came true."

[illegible] evening. I was gazing at the sliding glass doors behind the [illegible] watching [illegible] pine [illegible] across the back yard. It [illegible] was [illegible] [illegible] and I wasn't convinced [illegible] the entire world [illegible] Quantum Mechanics

Incl lived up to its name then it did not just the ability to travel back and forth through time but also as their name implied side was cross to another. So what was QVI was doing in the middle of this operation? It was for the events and purposes printed out into a new parallel universe, created every second.

Who's behind this?" I asked.

I don't know," he said, and I don't want to know. The reason we're here though is so we can have a great here." He frowned at his absently tapped a forefinger against the table. "I'm guessing that the barbarian people on is one sector of many and the Party of which Tennessee is just the one for this part and timeframe."

Couldn't we find out?" I said, feeling a cold sweat around the place…"

No way more," Jay said. "Then slowly let out a breath. "Dude, you're going to be straight with you now. I'm on the lam. The fucked up to me and now I am running for my life."

I knew this day Jay had come to work he looked like. As soon as he came through the receptionist told him that he was wanted in the first floor boardroom just down the hall. Something about a job performance review. Nervously hoping it was only about taking a toilet to someone's satisfaction, Jay went to the boardroom only to find that it was vacant. He'd barely taken a seat at the table though when an older guy he recognized as being one of the upstairs operators walked in. He did not say anything to Jay as he closed the door behind him. Instead, he kept his computer on the table before him opened it and ran a finger across its trackpad to toggle a command. Then he walked out of the room quickly closing the door behind him.

Jay sat there and he began to see a montage of images from newspaper articles, magazines, television news, sports, Internet websites and blogs. Most of them about him. Different versions of him.

Jay knew that Joseph was the developer of a mathematical theory about time travel that he was currently selling to the Chinese and with which he had managed to [illegible] in the [illegible] most popular restaurant in LA [illegible] the

where directors and stars go to eat to be seen at a big night at the Academy Awards. Maybe a Senator with presidential aspirations. Not a New York politician who engaged me in shoot-down-the-street fisticuffs in the opening hours of World War III, which incidentally lasted just three days. We even had a moment to eat at the Waldorf-Astoria. I'm..."

He stopped me. "I know who you are." I was looking at Paris in all these places. Maybe more often than was common, but I knew. And I was sure he knew that I knew. But I was thinking there was a small room in my head that just opened its doors and said that I slipped in the shower and hit my head on the side of the tub and died. Just like that.

"I see—"

"Do you really?" He opened his eyes again to give me a sharp look. "Because we're living in a world now where we know that we also know what we're not supposed to know, so that we're just pressed and pressed and pressed until we're forced to be Soviet screw around with us, fella."

"You're scared, aren't you?"

Damn right I was scared. I really hoped someone would get changed before we went out. I realized that the last place I ever wanted to be again was that room at the Soho Grand, where the pressing of telling me to protect a world-changing secret had driven my dear friend to suicide. I just got over that.

And then I knew. Something else I knew. I said:

"Look, I'm sorry about your friend, but I'm not in the business of getting people to open up. That's the part that I'm not good at. I'm sorry. I know you're under a lot of pressure, but I'm not the person you need to talk to. Dash."

Yeah, okay. I said it. I'm sorry. I did. Even though I found myself wishing that I could have saved him, that he could be here. It was just crazy, and I'm not the person you hope to run into when you're at the chance that he's going to help you. I'm not. But I'm sure you could use more help than I could possibly give you. But I'm sure you're more than he was going to be able to provide. That's not true. It's my experience or anyone else's.

And his tracks led straight to my house.

"Look," I said. "I want to help you, but—well, for starters, we don't have a guest room anymore. Which was true—we didn't get many visitors so we'd taken out the extra bed and dresser a few years ago to make room for more bookcases. But there's a motel in the next town, that's just a few miles away. We've used it ourselves for a few when we've lost power during a nor'easter, and it's pretty good."

"You're kicking me out, aren't you?"

"No. I'm sorry, there's no place for you here, and believe me, you don't want to sleep on the living room sofa. You'd have the dogs trying to climb up on top of you all night. That motel's safer than being here, though. It's right at the I-91 ramp, so there's truck drivers and tourists coming and going at all hours, and the state police barracks are just down the road."

Even as I spoke, I could hear my voice beginning to rise. I was begging him not to stay here, even if I wasn't saying so. No one is going to risk trying to harm you with all those people around. I went on, feeling as anxious as I'd ever been. "And after you get a good night's sleep, you can come back here in the morning and we'll figure out what to do."

Jay regarded me for a few moments. There was disappointment in his eyes, but also resignation. "Sure, I guess that's the smart thing to do," he said finally. "I can do that. Thanks."

So I walked him out to his car, giving him directions to the motel and asking him to call me from there as soon as he checked in. He shook my hand as he climbed in, and a few seconds later he was driving down the road, taillights vanishing in the warm summer night.

He didn't call. And that was the last I saw of him.

The following morning, as I was driving into town to get the mail, I spotted his car again. It was pulled over on the shoulder of the mountainside road that leads up to my house, just a few hundred yards from the blinking orange caution light that marks the center of the little farm village where I live. The cop car belonging to the local police force was parked behind it, and as soon as I recognized Jay's car I pulled over and asked the first officer what was going on. He told me that the car had been found abandoned just about an hour earlier. Its motor was shut off, and there was no sign of struggle, but the driver **was missing.**

I told him, and later the estate lawyers who came over to my house to investigate [illegible] I didn't tell them the rest [illegible] and he never returned up in the cellar door. Something happened to him though and I have no idea what it was.

That's why I've written this story.

[illegible] That's what I'll tell you if you ever ask.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

[illegible]

THE MERMAID CLUB

by Cat Rambo & Mike Resnick

Sensible shoes make far too much sense…

The first rule of Mermaid Club is

We

So there

near the

law

with

the

stroke

take

make

to claim victory

didn't

would have been good fun to

laps

She

Because

She said

The

she was being

her

from

number into a computer reminder with her long nails each painted with a pattern of silver fishes on a blue background.

Since the shed I had turned to reschedule dust had an hour or two to kill. The receptionist had given me a free pass so I used it. My momma didn't raise no sissy. She'd seen rows of poison frogs and translucent electric spitting eels and a vast catfish as long as I was tall. Swarms of hermit crabs and three enormous turtles swimming around the tank and around without stopping just gazing into the distance.

It was mostly kids around the petting pool but I didn't care. I was already getting weird looks from the moms with their kids as well as the two single dads bending down at their end. I looked up my sleeves and put my hand into the cool water and felt the rays sliding past their skin so smooth the only drag was the minuscule texture of my fingerprints.

I had another appointment that evening with a retirement home chain that wanted to add one of our kiosks in each and every little day room, but there were hours to kill before then.

I was people watching when I noticed the little girls. One was digging around in the oversized purse she carried a flashy green sequin and sequin thing of the sort my own daughter would have loved when she was six about the size of these two two decades ago. She dragged out whatever it was some sort of Tupperware and thrust it at the other. They were both dressed like fairy princesses little dress-up sneakers lots of pins and dime-store rhinestone bling and they looked out of place in the passing crowd like a home made movie about supernatural creatures.

Some decathlon baseball type went past without looking and left his backpack collide with the girls knocking them sideways. The container went flying landing at my feet in an explosion of gummy worms.

I knelt down and picked them up off my boots coiled them back in the plastic tome. A slip of paper had been mixed in with them. I snagged it between two fingers and picked up the Tupperware square.

"Hey. No! Leave it!" A security guard barreled his way through the crowd towards me the two little girls behind him.

I'm not,' I said. I held out the flippers to me and he snatched it away from me, as if swinging around to deposit it in the nearest garbage. She frowned at me and I saw, with astonishment, that she was not a small child as I had assumed but an adult woman, just like the boy. She turned and walked away from me.

I stood scowling at the sea and folded my arms and moved into my line of sight the long, narrow, wavering, bright women. The slip of paper was still in my hand and I stooped it into my pocket without looking at it and went out the nearest door.

It was one of those days when the garden felt full of late fall sunlight, brown oak leaves, first flurries of snow, thick under foot. I pulled the piece of paper out of my pocket and glanced down at it. It said: *Mermaid Club.*

Some game, maybe? It was weird. I turned it over. Drawn in black felt-tip pen on the other side was a tiny mermaid. Not the cute boiled-sweet-on-a-stick-for-the-corporate-logo I salute daily. A weirder mermaid, the sort a Celtic Magdalene might have drawn on a cave wall recording what she'd seen on the seashore, half-imagination and half sea-lion.

Her waist-length hair looked shaggy, her protruding pastel nipples and arrow pointed them out to the world. I put the piece of paper in my pocket and decided to go and find myself somewhere else. The rest home corporate office was a few weeks away, but surely there would be a bookstore or coffee shop or something in Wick.

As I left the garden I saw the girl who'd spoken to me. Sometimes you run into people who've got something about them, and you can't get them out of your head. I was intrigued to see that she was not a child, as I had assumed, but a grown woman, just like the boy. She turned and walked away from me.

It was full of the sort of people you'd expect to find in a small coastal town. But there was also a tall, thin man with a long, black, straight ponytail and a pink streak in his hair. He looked up as I walked in, and I saw that he had a nose ring. He looked at me for a moment, then looked down at his phone. He matched the pink streak in his hair.

When I took out my phone to look at the mysterious piece of paper, the man with the nose ring looked up at me and smiled. He looked at me for a moment, then looked down at his phone. He looked at me for a moment, then looked down at his phone.

at the [illegible] to me, using just the tip of [illegible] silver and green lacquered fingernail.

I could [illegible] felt to [illegible] to the [illegible] so I pocketed it up folded it and slid it back into my pocket.

[illegible] that next she [illegible] nodding at the [illegible] door on the wall across the way. "I'll buzz you through."

Thanks, I said. She [illegible] and I was ready to go, and had [illegible] on me she [illegible] she stood. I gave her a little wave and slipped out the door.

I [illegible] on the second floor, so I wasn't surprised that the green painted [illegible] down to [illegible] cement packed between the [illegible] by [illegible] But as I progressed, I knew that I must [illegible] past the first floor, the [illegible] going down and down and down. The wall lamps changed from [illegible] and what [illegible] metal rings to [illegible] and [illegible] holding thick, [illegible] bulbs shaped like candle flames. I stopped once or twice, thinking that I [illegible] but each time I looked up and down, I [illegible] upward, toward the distant landing. I saw nothing.

Finally I came to the door.

It was [illegible] long, [illegible] wooden beams, [illegible] oak-black. Inset into the wood [illegible] almost in stole, so I had to turn my fingers sideways to insert [illegible] that it was really there. It was the same metal that had been on the paper. I held the slip up next to it to confirm the resemblance.

There was no doubt about it. It was just that great uncompromising door that looked too heavy to move.

I [illegible] my knuckles against the door, not sure that I could strike loudly enough to be heard through the thick wood. But I swung open instantly, the door giving its weight open as though on a trick.

The [illegible] smelled of steel and ozone. The diffuse light filtering down from above revealed [illegible] but showed huge, [illegible] of [illegible] and small figures [illegible] human-sized and as far as I could tell, as human as I—moving among them.

I took a step toward the door, but it swung inexorably and silently closed. A woman's voice startled me. "You there, what do you want?"

I stepped toward it, [illegible] the slip of paper. It had gotten me this far, after all.

The woman who took a bite of her nose and bright blue eyes. She wore a white fur coat and gray [illegible] high [illegible] with a smudge of [illegible] on her cheek that appeared [illegible] something. She opened the [illegible] and [illegible] with a slight bow. "I'm sorry to disturb you so early on a [illegible] good half hour early. We're unprepared."

The [illegible] and I was [illegible] on that when the door opened and another woman entered.

She looked [illegible] to see [illegible] and [illegible] looked around. She was [illegible] one [illegible] white [illegible] that I was and that's what I did. (What I do is not important. Work with what you can, and as fate deals them to you.)

Something [illegible] me. [illegible] This is [illegible] I waved in her direction as the [illegible] was seated. We [illegible] and [illegible] "Miss Simpson," she said.

She [illegible] I did look as [illegible] I hoped she was thinking [illegible] case [illegible] of mistaken identity.

When [illegible] the last [illegible] I [illegible] I was from Dios. When [illegible] the [illegible] I [illegible] as [illegible] possible. I prefer [illegible]

She took [illegible] "I noticed the overlap," she said hesitantly.

I flapped an impatient hand. "That's what I'm here to discuss." I snapped at [illegible] "I [illegible] and over again."

"So we should [illegible]," she said.

"Of course [illegible] "Miss [illegible] We [illegible] would be reasonable?"

[illegible] I [illegible] in a [illegible] direction [illegible] I [illegible] I [illegible] pressed down [illegible] I [illegible] ing against the [illegible] "I [illegible] haps a few [illegible]

Myths [illegible] I [illegible] mermaid [illegible] Myths. That was all they were.

But they had an alien cast to them. I was afraid that asking would tip them off too much, but I had to know. I turned to my guide. "When you say them, who do you mean?"

"The First Mothers," she said, glancing back over her shoulder, her brow raised. Her high heels grated on the stones, making her wobble every once in a while. "Didn't your superiors tell you?"

I shook my head, trying to project chagrin and we're both just two cogs getting spun around by the big machine camaraderie.

"Maybe they didn't know," Daisy said. "You know the bigger bugs just don't communicate."

I appreciated the backup but worried that she was overselling it. Nonetheless, my guide relaxed.

We would be all women, she said seriously. The First Mothers are terrestrial incarnations of the ancient goddesses who once guided humanity. Holdouts of the old ways destroyed by wielders of the old tools.

The mural we were passing showed ranks of soldiers being mowed down by what looked like lasers. Daisy and I both eyed it, then each other. She shrugged at me and mouthed something behind our guide's back, but I couldn't catch it.

At length we came to a great arch-shaped door. The tunnel grew in height and width as we approached it, and I had sworn enough to hold a door twice as tall as I stood. Where the wood of the first door had seemed rough and dark, this was smooth as glass and shot through with golden flecks at some angles, like the light obsidian. Again, no handle, but instead a round circle of a panel in the door's center. So the guide had to stretch upward to reach it. When she did so, the door moved as silently as the first one, but rolling into slots in the wall, vanishing and then reappearing as soon as all of us had stepped through.

Inside the corridor turned abruptly downward and we crept along through a brief tunnel. I found myself wondering about the real ambassador I'd been expecting. By now at least half an hour had passed.

We emerged into a strange room, its walls metal-sided. It looked like something out of a sci-fi movie, and in the middle was an enormous tank full of mermaids.

At least that's the best description of them I could come up with. They had green scales and long black hair that might have actually

been tentacles, and they mic, that looked like women if you had squinted hard as the one test subject

We celebrated [illegible] that I am name told as reluctant *What do you do here?*

"I just want to sell you coffee," I said.

There was [illegible] good humor. A lesser man would have been annoyed but I had perfect [illegible] down. I stood here conferring with a fresh smile on my face radiating goodwill.

Maybe the wound buy bought [illegible] just then a runner arrived, panting, [illegible] pointed. She was breathing too hard to speak but apparently the mermaid could read her mind. The voice vibrated again [illegible] buzzing [illegible] that drove Bass and me to our knees though the rest seemed unaffected.

[illegible] Send the waiter and take them away.

Then we were dragged [illegible] surprisingly comfortable. I said as much to Bass who said [illegible] standard police with these sorts of organizations. It keeps them from [illegible] sympathetic for the prisoners and helping them escape. Her tone was matter-of-fact.

[illegible] sorts of [illegible] Ancient feminist other goddess cults that have inherited [illegible] to the point where their headquarters are based beneath the Parthenon [illegible] Aphrodite [illegible] glared at me.

She stood [illegible] head. Despite the fact that it [illegible] looked like [illegible] she was [illegible] things from some weird [illegible] and her personality [illegible] upon [illegible] and some girl she [illegible] pains and flew [illegible] angel [illegible] that just appeal together into a total psycho.

"Unsheathing a pair of human [illegible] she [illegible] herself," she said. "You can't [illegible] shoot [illegible]."

"What?"

Beatrix [illegible] had [illegible] to [illegible] pair of [illegible] shoes when [illegible] fomenting [illegible] revolution. She [illegible] at me. I [illegible] wouldn't tell [illegible] was inside or not. It [illegible] not important. As an agent [illegible] been trained [illegible] how to find [illegible] missions. Shoes are not [illegible]. She held up [illegible] question is how do I break us out of here?"

[illegible] the fuck is your agent? And what is that?

One of the [illegible] Mermaid Club [illegible] Mermaid Club [illegible] And this [illegible] immaterial [illegible] gal [illegible]

permit escapers in the confusion but I could get some breathing filter." She held up a small black cylinder that did look as though it was intended to be nasally inserted.

"Wait a minute!" I said. "*One* of them?"

"Yep, only one filter." She shrugged.

"No. I mean one of the four secret conspiracies. As in there are multiples?"

"Of course there's multiples." She stared at me looking perplexed. "How many hundreds of women do you think there are? Plenty of conspiracies to go around. I've got the Vestal Virgins, the Sapphic Misty Archoneri, Madonna Mystics, and my group." She held up the little gun. "Maybe I should test this and just shoot whoever comes in."

Her point was well taken. How else would they have known to come in ready to disarm her?

Four soldiers were unconscious on the floor, all wearing what did seem to be the standard issue thigh-high boots. But there were enough of them to waste. Dr. Sweet turned back into the presence of the hostile lens.

And now she'd met Jennifer Cooper. She stood there dressed for success in a powered blazer with a scarf and matching low slung pumps, her arms crossed, her face scowling.

"I should have known," Mercury she said. "Thought you'd swoop in and steal my sale?"

"It's not quite that either," I said, but wasn't sure how to explain exactly how it was without sealing my fate. Some days it just doesn't pay to get out of bed in the morning.

She turned her attention back to the lens, apparently unfazed by the appearance of me at the test of a station that only the merging of the sexes could have produced, would have considered impossible, or at least highly improbable.

"Here's a female chauvinist representative," she said reluctantly. "I suppose you might as well give him over to me to be executed by the company." She sighed. "He is, she added, a good singer, very good swordsman and I hate to lose him."

What about his assistant?

"What?" I turned and looked at Dr. Sweet. "I've never seen this woman before in my life."

I saw the other Dr. Sweet explode through the glass, though understand better that it's got a very good head. Did giant talons

really descend from the sky and [illegible] the trees. Did swarms of women in bathing suits and all that sort appear and [illegible] all of the women [illegible] A [illegible] sparks, lightning, flying cats?

I was looking up at the [illegible] jellyfish flowers [illegible] heaven animals [illegible] thick and then [illegible] strands [illegible]

I was [illegible] Mabel [illegible] breath as the [illegible] people [illegible] suit they were [illegible] to come [illegible]

A scrap of paper [illegible] the mermaid swimming across the [illegible] The first [illegible] Mermaid Cove is you never [illegible] Mermaid Club.

The toddlers [illegible] on a turtle green bench [illegible] appointment with the [illegible] message but I didn't listen to them.

I looked at the [illegible] back to my hotel. In the [illegible] to [illegible] and [illegible] the [illegible] the original [illegible]

[illegible] thought.

That was when I [illegible] Jenn before [illegible] stroking [illegible] to [illegible] sales [illegible] at that paper.

❖ ❖ ❖

I spent the [illegible] I [illegible] I could find about mermaids. Unfortunately [illegible] aimed at six-year-olds.

So I tried [illegible] and [illegible] many I did most [illegible] Or maybe I did [illegible] Of course if I were [illegible] lock me away in the funny farm for life.

But I couldn't help dwelling on the fact that the Mermaid Club was a long-lived and presumably widespread feminist conspiracy and I was a man and they'd let me live.

Why?

A gaggle of sweet-toothed women walked by and gave me a wink and suddenly I knew the mermaids were not as supportive of the next generation as they might have us think. They might not like us as they might want to take all power away from us, but there was one thing they needed us for, one thing that science or I ter-to-society could survive without.

And they'd let me live. I knew about them, and I was still alive. I began thinking long and hard about my next move.

I could go to the authorities, but how would they react to a guy who claimed there's a conspiracy of mermaids and aliens and females and that they've been around for a few billennia? My home for the next few decades would be a small room with concrete walls and iron bars in place of a door and windows.

I could seek out mainstream conspiracies. But a quick look at our recent history showed where that led. Stalin, Hitler, Saddam, Pol Pot, Hell, in the past century and a half we'd had two Roosevelts and a Churchill, and not much else. I mean, who would *want* to be part of that conspiracy?

No conspiracy that could produce a Maggie Thatcher suited me just fine. And of course there was another consideration. Since I was in the library I didn't even have to guess. I could check the numbers out, and so I did. Seems that American Pharoah, the most recent racehorse to win the Triple Crown, was breeding 150 mares a year, all of them shipped to his stud farm where he lived comfortably. A few other stallions were breeding more than 100 mares a year during *our* breeding season, then shipping to Australia to breed another 100 during *their* breeding season.

Even as I considered my future as a stallion to the mermaids' human servants, I realized that some things would have to change. I'd have to start shaving with a blade instead of an electronic razor. I would do to give one of those beauties a scrape on the cheek.

And what if the mermaids themselves were intending to move the way with me? I'd have to lose a quick twenty pounds and start showering more than every third or fourth day. Of course, I'd have a new wardrobe, but it would have to wait, but since I didn't know quite

what turned a mermaid on at all seemed impossibly wouldn't hurt to get a more expensive deodorant, too.

[illegible] I got to thinking. Of course, I'll never know if these centuries-old [illegible] and inspiration [illegible] aquarium. What about [illegible] Of the seashore. There'd been [illegible] of mermaid sightings over the years. Wasn't that even [illegible] of them were right [illegible] I saw were at least presentable, but what if the Sophia Loren [illegible] down on the Chicago or Denver aquarium? Or what if she was assigned from the sea to laze on a rock in [illegible] as she thought it would [illegible] mind?

When I settled down and started thinking [illegible] *thinking* about the situation, I mean there was no reason why the Secretariat of Seattle Seafood [illegible] couldn't [illegible] to service the first feminist conspiracy [illegible] more than [illegible] camp. Days [illegible] didn't [illegible] begins and other [illegible] homes. She was clearly a member [illegible] with [illegible] and if the mermaids could have a Sophia Loren, why [illegible] Doris Day? Maybe [illegible] couldn't have a Pia Anderson [illegible] of the [illegible] Joans who smelled [illegible] sprouted dyed [illegible] sight [illegible] chocolate eyes.

The possibilities were endless.

Of course, [illegible] competition.

I assumed [illegible] pretty normal [illegible] knew nothing of the Mermaid Club [illegible] I was [illegible] *did* know [illegible] of being [illegible] how to [illegible] attention [illegible]

I dropped broad hints at two of my favorite bars as well as the [illegible] knowing [illegible] to [illegible] about the Club when [illegible] committee [illegible] something [illegible] the next few days [illegible] same result [illegible] help [illegible] and even Madame **Bovary's 5-Star Burlesque Emporium.**

Others were [illegible] from the [illegible] But one more bar, the Neptune, [illegible] [illegible] Valhausen [illegible] [illegible] be. [illegible] was [illegible] [illegible] and [illegible] of [illegible] and 5 [illegible] [illegible] were [illegible] [illegible] guessed that the [illegible] might as well [illegible] them out [illegible] [illegible] Mermaid Club [illegible] one of its rivals [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] became obvious that they had no [illegible] what I was talking about.

I began to wonder [illegible] [illegible] the world was [illegible] about the Mermaid Club. And if so, I never [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] said

they could have killed me at the aquarium. Didn't they have something special planned for me? Or were they perhaps looking for a fight?

I went back to the aquarium bright and early the next morning, prepared to confront my hosts or my missing bedmate, whichever came first. I took the green-carpeted stairs down past ground level, but it was done before I could insert the key. I went to the nearest door to get my bearings, to find an animal to portal to, any kind. I searched but finally I returned to the main floor.

I went to the gift shop and asked the girl who had passed me through the turnstile what had happened to the deer.

She looked at me like I was crazy. "What deer sir?"

"The one at the bottom of the staircase," I said impatiently.

"There has never been a deer down there," she answered.

"But I was there! I growled. "It was down there just a few days ago."

"You must be mistaken," she said.

"I know where I was!" I shouted.

The girl shook her head. "Your wife told me you might become irrational. I guess it's because of your medication."

"My wife?" I repeated. *"What wife?"*

"The one who's approaching us," said the girl.

I turned and saw Jenn walking toward me.

"Dammit, Jenn!" I said. "What the hell's going on here?"

"It's all right," she assured the girl at the counter, taking my arm, squeezing it painfully, and leading me away from the counter.

"I repeat," I said angrily. "What the--?"

"Shut up and listen," she hissed. "Listen carefully," she said softly, never relinquishing her grip.

She led me out of the museum, down the street, and around the corner to a diner. Yes, it wasn't a diner, it was a cafe, big enough to be called a restaurant.

"You would think I could be grateful just to have survived," she said, without coming back trying to make trouble.

"But aren't you?" I protested. "You tried to kill me!"

She shook her head. "I thought they'd succeeded." She looked around to make sure no one could overhear us. "And it wasn't *them*; it was Daisy."

So Dr. [redacted] discovered the Mermaid Club and decided to end it, I said, frowning. Something [redacted]

Jem smiled. "He's [redacted] figured it all out, but believe me, you haven't."

"What [redacted] Some outside [redacted] your group, maybe [redacted] shooting or gassing or whatever [redacted] stopped and tried another. When [redacted] seen her before."

"Close," she admitted.

So she's [redacted] Mermaid Club. I [redacted] What is she a member of the Mermaid Club?

Jem [redacted] with a smile that [redacted]

"Okay," I said. "Enlighten me."

So [redacted] to rule [redacted] be [redacted] you get [redacted]

"I'm all ears," I said.

The [redacted] Mermaid Club [redacted] chapters, and [redacted] and sexual [redacted] and sexual dominance over [redacted] chapters.

A [redacted] I repeated. "[redacted] fifty million members?"

"More like a billion," she answered.

"I'm impressed," I admitted.

"You damned well ought to be."

But [redacted] billion [redacted] working the [redacted]

On [redacted] them is that we all wear sensible shoes."

"And your goal?"

[redacted]

I thought about [redacted] the [redacted] that have been around [redacted]

"And this [redacted] the men?"

"Well, you're [redacted]

She stared at me for a long moment, then sighed deeply. "You know, just before you said that I thought you might be bright enough to put in the gene pool." She shook her head sadly. "Now I don't know."

The rest of the conversation was too disjointed and especially too humiliating to repeat word for word. The gist of it is that I am on a six month trial period and am under constant observation every minute.

I watch my language. I don't pinch girls in mini-skirts. I have not proposed to anyone. I tip my hat to every woman I see who is wearing comfortable shoes.

You think I'm a sissy, or Rover, I'm sure, I'm well mannered, obedient pets? Then just you watch Moriarty.

Hell, all *they* got for behaving was a piece of liver.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Cat Rambo's first novel, *[illegible]*, is set in the world in which many of her short stories have taken place.

Mike Resnick's recording career [illegible] he has written short fiction. He is the author of [illegible] novels, 5 short story collections, and 3 screenplays, and has edited [illegible] anthologies and [illegible]. He was the Worldcon Guest of Honor in 2012.

THE GREAT SETI COVER-UP OF 1947

by H. Paul Shuch

Want to know the truth about Roswell? Search!

"Weather balloon crash." That was my immediate reaction when I was first decades after the fact. I had got around to reading the Roswell report that I had the good sense not to write the Gough. After all, I've been down this road before.

I mean, I was a real live Ohio State University. "Wow!" signal by in August 1977. That was not confirmed unverified detection of extraterrestrial intelligence. Within my colleagues and I had spread string, becoming ever larger numbers and letters in computer from the bright star to escape he scrutinized the same area of the sky and the sound of the printout. Well sort of. It was a long time ago. In the days when I was *real* thinking of law. I'm talking about the Ohio State University Holy but signal. But I digress.

The astounding candidate event had been electromagnetic emissions which seemed to be coming from a point in the constellation Sagittarius. Our equipment to make sure it was not coming from our own terrestrial sources. It was written right into the fundamental Project SETI operations protocols. Frank Drake and Bob Dixon did just that. Every big was hunted down and dragged proper. Next the protocols required that I dispatch myself to

make sure you're not living in your Bob and Jerry's clichéd that boy is wel[illegible] [illegible] alternative explanations. By trying to *disprove* [illegible] we stumbled across Darling home. Our test is the null hypothesis that is not rejected easy to look for Darling in that you start to believe in aliens.

[illegible] alternative hypotheses to test. Could it [illegible] been [illegible] Reflections of an Earth emission being bounced off the moon. Another planet. A piece of space junk. There are tests for each of these and under the Bayesian [illegible] Prof Dan Kerris the Big Data team performed these systematically. Of course, you can never completely disprove an alternative [illegible] you have to do is assign [illegible] probabilities. At the end there is a possibility we could be wrong, how probable does such a result have to be to count as high. What we had been expected was an [illegible] interrupted a microwave communication [illegible] processes and covered natural astrophysical phenomena. Further possible [illegible] Further would be worthy of a Nature front [illegible] new what [illegible] but their knowledge claims is [illegible] unless we have a separate, totally independent sample of the observed phenomenon.

So after a while we're trying to disprove your detection we're trying to get other observatories to confirm it. The Protocols spell this out in [illegible] respect it is possible to tell everybody. So Bob and Jerry did. Over a hundred follow up observations around the neighbourhood of RA 9 Dec 37 turned up absolutely nothing. I know because when these attempts were performed with the utmost skill and precision I received them myself, at Green Bank. But, I digress.

It was [illegible] a musician [illegible] of right ascension, and a series of [illegible] something about their detection kept nagging at me. 15 August [illegible] 1 August 9[illegible] stood out. It occurred [illegible] that was the [illegible] I realised! Could this have been the Mercer Ship coming him home?

[illegible] missed my [illegible] SETI [illegible] Then I made the [illegible] thing my own. There [illegible] sceptics [illegible] passing [illegible] a lecture at the Academy. He was [illegible] across the press [illegible] the earth [illegible] New thing in the [illegible] press [illegible] about the [illegible] National Enquirer. SETI Scientist Confirms Existence

Alive?" And that's goes my [illegible] straight [illegible] Since then I've [illegible] myself. But, I digress.

Now back to [illegible] check out [illegible] who were [illegible] did indeed crash [illegible] during a storm [illegible] Several folks from the nearby [illegible] that they'd covered [illegible] a press conference the base commander did an about face. "Alien spacecraft. We never said anything about [illegible] a weather balloon."

Weather balloon, my ass

Cover-up. Sure [illegible] But what? What? Whatever was so secret that [illegible] and then deny it? [illegible] that ever [illegible] the original [illegible] the truth? What [illegible]

Then [illegible] one of *ours*.

[illegible] spaceships in the New Mexico desert [illegible] during the Second World War. Operation Paperclip. Operation Project Rod and [illegible] engineers. We [illegible] whiz kids such as Wernher von Braun [illegible] U.S. medal [illegible] Nazi war criminals. They were flown to Mexico.

Or [illegible] appointed [illegible] rumbles in the [illegible] the New Mexico desert [illegible] scientists and [illegible] The border [illegible] citizens. They [illegible] Brilliant!

How they got those [illegible] country is beyond me. They must've [illegible] thing you know [illegible]

the New Mexico badlands. And von Braun is running it. And the nearest place to fly in supplies and captured Nazi parts is . . . you guessed it—Roswell AFB. But, I digress.

Back in the seventies I was teaching Aeronautics in California. I used to fly my old Beechcraft down to the Mojave Desert to consult for NASA. On one of those flights I decided on a little side trip to Las Vegas, but I never made it there. Partial engine failure at a couple of thousand feet meant I had to make an emergency landing, but quick-witted the only suitable site within range was a secret military facility called Groom Lake aka Area 51. Fortunately they didn't shoot me down. I declared my emergency with a Mayday call on 121.5 squawked 7700 the whole enchilada. Then, I invoked FAR 91.3 b. That's the rule that says in an emergency the Pilot in Command can deviate from any regulation to the extent necessary to deal with the emergency.

Of course I had heard the rumors that the Air Force was storing its captured alien spacecraft at Groom Lake and even that the Roswell saucer was stored there. So I was not at all surprised when my chopped Beech and I were instantly surrounded by about a dozen military police, all sporting M-16s, and all looking perfectly willing to use me as target practice. So I kept my head down and my hands up, and I had soon convinced them of the nature of my emergency. After that it was just a matter of hanging out at the Officer's Club, swapping war stories with the troops, while waiting for the mechanics to make the required repairs to my aircraft.

As it did with most pilots, my captors and compatriots were relaxed and welcoming the O'Club's comestibles enough I, hoping to try out that evening's steadfastly refusal from imbibing. Once they had indulged sufficiently they all began to doze off one by one. I of course couldn't resist seizing the moment and ventured outside to check out not just the status of my own aircraft but also the contents of the hangars. And there, I saw it!

Although it sported a saucer shaped emergency the vehicle upon which I stumbled bore little resemblance to the stereotypical flying saucer so familiar from B-movie fame. But neither did it resemble any modern aircraft with which I was familiar. There was structural damage indicative of a hard landing but the body of the ship was intact. Surface corrosion of the aluminum alloy fuselage marked its

vintage as the dawn of the age of jet and rocket sports. Neither propeller nor the expected streamlined compressor blades. Only the lines of the craft showed it to be designed with personal flight in mind. Its markings were clear. Interesting enough but hardly out of the ordinary for WWII. The circle of Army Air Corps roundels was unmistakable. Could this be the craft seen in the long stored Roswell spaceship?

The chatter of teeth in the cockpit drew me back into the immediate shadows and as soon as the coast was clear, back to the dusty retreat of the Orcadian where my superiors remained in sweet slumber. I wriggled out and tiptoed as though exiting my own room so that they wouldn't know I had ever left and proceeded with the business of the day. Less bright eyes were at work and preparing it for the journey home.

Of how I came to speak I won't. I had been Bat, I held my tongue. This was the first hands-the-brass-men SETI scientist had discovered in advanced aircraft. Back in April of 1960 at Green Bank, WV, Frank Drake had tuned a modified Search for Extra-terrestrial Intelligence receiver to the 1420 megacycle Magic Hydrogen Line frequency for electromagnetic communications from other civilizations. As he slewed his dish to Tau Ceti and Epsilon Eridani and picked up strong, powerful pulsing signals, he asked himself in awed disbelief, can it really be this easy?"

Exactly 2 hours and 36 minutes to the day later he was paid a visit by two men in black suits who told him in no uncertain terms that he was to keep his mouth shut about what he had seen. Frank Drake became the first of many scientists to be silenced by the Men in Black. Project Ozma, the search for extraterrestrial intelligence, was shut down. Not for the last time.

Exactly 2 years to the day after Project Ozma was shut down, Frank Drake had an accident. He discovered the truth but had the good sense to keep mum about it. As must I, now.

The wisest of my colleagues at Groom Lake separated throttle cables as quickly as discovered and reached. Although

pre-flight inspection showed Son-of-a-Bitch to be airworthy, and I was promptly issued a set of flight orders that included immediate take-off with unrestricted airspace. That night, working under a full moon and working seats was breathtaking. It might well be a night flight that I would be tempted to hijack.

But, I digress.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

H. Paul Shuch is a [illegible] professor who [illegible] SETI [illegible] Mr. Volunteer [illegible] Planetary Society [illegible] Volunteer [illegible] Paul [illegible] generation [illegible]

A RIGHT JOLLY OLD...

by James L. Cambias

He knows when you've been sleeping...

I stopped in my favorite coffee shop the day after Christmas trying to get a little work done and ran into Dr. Francis Cecil. Cecil is not precisely a friend of mine, but we sometimes run into each other in coffee shops and we've had a few conversations. But I did not seek him out this time, however he positively insisted on joining me. I was unpacking my laptop and he sat down on the other side of the table. "How was Christmas?"

"Oh, fine," I said. "And yours?"

He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye. "I had the best Christmas I have ever had in my life."

"That's nice," I said. "Family come to visit?"

"No. I spent Christmas Eve alone in my flat. Put out my stocking and ate a meal by myself. But I got the best Christmas present ever." He took a breath before continuing. "Do you ever wonder about where the idea of Santa Claus comes from?" he asked.

"Coke?"

"No! That is just plain wrong. On the contrary. No, I refer back to the poem."

"'The Night Before Christmas.'"

"A Visit From St. Nicholas, by Clement Moore. Written in 1823. It's my favorite because we don't even think about it

1 [illegible] like normal people.

Moore wasn't some Hallmark hack—he was a scholar of ancient languages politically connected owned half of Manhattan taught at a theological seminary. Why did he suddenly crank out a catchy verse about Santa Claus? And why leave out anything connected to the actual saint?"

"I dunno," I said.

Remember the year 1823. That's the same year Caspar David Friedrich paints *The Polar Sea*."

I don't see the connection, I said. People say that to Cecil a lot.

Polar expeditions. Santa Claus? Do I have to draw a picture? The Royal Navy sent three separate expeditions to the Arctic in 1818. And that same year John Cleves Symmes sits down and writes to Congress urging them to fund an American polar expedition to look for the hole at the Pole, leading into the Hollow Earth."[3]

You think the Royal Navy was looking for Santa Claus in the Hollow Earth?"[4]

You're closer than you think. Remember Moore hadn't written his poem yet when the scientific expeditions went North. Assuming he *really* wrote it. But in 1811, right *before* the Royal Navy got so interested in the Arctic, there's a novel about a polar explorer, whose ship is caught in the ice, who hears a fantastic story from a man he encounters crossing the ice cap in pursuit of a monstrous figure.

A memory from high school English class rose dimly in my head. "Wait, that's—"

Frankenstein. Very good. I don't know where Mary Shelley got her information, but she and her husband were connected to pretty much all of Europe's intellectual and political elite. It could have been Joseph Grimaldi, or maybe Prime Minister Perceval let something slip before he was assassinated.

"So Frankenstein—" I began.

"Not the *Modern Prometheus*. Adrian, he's being Frankenstein created Lords Symmes's Hole at the Pole."[6]

3. Yes, he really wrote it.

4. *Or, The Modern Prometheus*. I can use Wikipedia, too.

6. [illegible]

I didn't want to go down that particular rabbit hole. Stick to the original question. "How does that connect with your best Christmas present ever?"

Cecil ticked items off on his fingers. "Here's the timeline. Frankenstein—who, as we've established, was published six years before Murders in the Rue Morgue—and Poe's Arctic sometime before Mary writes the novel. I'm guessing her viewpoint guy Captain Walton is standing in for Commander Sherrington Lutwidge, who made an Arctic voyage in 1773. Lewis Carroll's uncle, we're a

Down the rabbit hole I thought and then forced myself not to think about it.

Frankenstein muses on the ice. Adam steals his body and pushes on. He finds Symmes Hole and makes contact with the Lemurians inside. Just a few years later, Clement Moore writes about a mysterious fur-cloaked figure distributing gifts. Obviously, Adam has gotten ahold of Lemurian superscience and made contact with the lost civilization of Thule or Dzeos. Dzeos. Dzeos. Lost civilizations, I'm telling you, there's always some lost civilization where you need one. But the Lemurians have a reputation for doing corruption and could need me. The reindeer are obviously a cover story."

"Cover for what?"

He looked at me like I was retarded. "Flying saucers, of course. Duh."

I tried to drop that particular thread. I forged on. Why would Frankenstein's Monster be putting presents in people's stockings?

"Read the book. The Monster isn't evil, exactly. Sometimes he tries to do good, he's kind of inept about it. After being ostracized and finding a new world he first sees, it's like a kind of moral awakening. He wants to make amends. So he starts giving presents. Just like Santa. Bad guys with superhuman strength and intelligence equipped with a station to observe and an army of Dzeos. Along the way he puts on a little weight and grows a beard."

Okay. Cecil's actually kind of right. Frankenstein's creature is living inside Symmes Hole at the moment and using lost civilization technology to commandeer the world's attention giving out presents. You should put on your brog

7. So very true.

8. [illegible] stormy night" fame.

His face lit up in that [illegible] put it up back at the beginning of the month. And that's what makes it the best Christmas present ever. He dug in his pocket and held it up for me to see. "I found it in my stocking yesterday morning!"

It was a lump of coal.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James L. Crumley [illegible]

GERONIMO'S SKULL

by Shariann Lewitt

If bones could talk…

Deer Island, May 1962

"Y[illegible] told both [illegible] where is necessary for the New World Order [illegible] commanded [illegible] German accent.

He elegant [illegible] in the German word [illegible] appeared [illegible] as he looked [illegible] the [illegible] Bruno gas [illegible] contract [illegible] that the issue still [illegible] establish the New World Order [illegible]

You wasted [illegible] He was not dressed [illegible] American [illegible] but [illegible] the Americans [illegible]

American [illegible] the American [illegible] New England accent. No [illegible] effort.

The German Master [illegible] involved in financial manipulations for several generations. I daresay that thirteen million would [illegible]

[illegible]

This place is a dump. It used to be nice. I remember when there were tennis courts and golf courses and servants. Now racists just like us wreck it and we have to serve our own drinks." The German had not stopped frowning from the time he had left the helipad, though Odin had done his admirable best as a host. Single malt whisky, Cuban cigars and comfortable chairs around a lovely table. Though the old mansion had no fires, the fans of the Stone House returned a certain chill. And of course they were sitting at The Ledges which were perfectly adequate with pleasant suites.

"Let us show you downstairs," the American said.

"Another rat hole? I've seen quite enough."

"But I think you may be a touch surprised," Odin commented.

The German stood and took his drink as they strolled over the remains of an elegant stone floor now full of weeds showing themselves above the cracks. Odin bent down and pulled up a piece of, though which the German could see a set of steel steps leading downward. He raised an eyebrow so Odin took a deep breath and hit the lights.

They descended a narrow way. The German did think for a moment that if he reprimanded the American too sternly he could do anything to this forsaken basement of a ruined island in the middle of the St Lawrence. The only people who knew he was there was the Grand Master of the First Lodge and it would take a long time to track down his body. He had come here with the American Knight after his star had risen before but he remained a Knight and the German had to admit more than merely highly intelligent and powerful enough to cover up a little scandal out here in an abandoned mausoleum. Still he had come to take charge of these headstrong wayward Americans. Perhaps they never should have opened a rival Lodge, not here where the Knights were almost barbarians themselves.

Still at the bottom of the stairs they followed along a short unimpressive corridor after Odin thumbed open a door. And then he had to keep all discipline not to gasp in amazement. The chamber Odin had revealed was modern and filled with equipment the German had never seen. What are those, he asked of the hulking huge metal boxes cut off by a glass wall.

Odin sighed just a bit. Computers. Very thinly. They have to be kept in a cool room and cold. But these are more powerful, more recent than even the mainframe the German may

The German nodded thoughtfully as he gazed at the wall of gray machinery at the far end of the room. He would have expected that computers would be silent and efficient, not noisy and inefficient things more reminiscent of the Industrial Revolution than modern technology. Between the two desks stood a tall metal cabinet at the far end was a wall-mounted display of maps studded with colored pins on rolling cork boards, some of which were placed next to desks and others clustered in the capacious open spaces. Desks surrounded by telecommunications equipment were arranged in two neat lines facing each other. A tiered rack cluttered against the left-hand wall and a telegraph station stood next to it.

"The computers are next door to the Pentagon," Odom explained. "The wires lead to the basement of the Bundesnachrichtendienst building in Berlin."

And the buzz of the electronics referred to the fact that every desk included a black phone.

Outside the room, Odom added, there was a faint hint of exasperation in his voice. "Every desk is connected with secure contact numbers for all living Bonesmen as well as our various corporations, Trust Companies and the Skull and Bones Network is always available to every member on duty in here."

"There is no one here now."

Odom ignored the comment. "And I cleared out anyone who wanted to work late tonight because I thought you could have privacy. But this complex also serves as a bunker, in case of any attack. We can retreat underground with a full support staff and continue Bonesmen business along the underground tunnels and individual chambers and even a small hospital. We're ready for anything, as you can see. Even a complete evacuation from above. The lights and electronics are self-contained. To get the worst happens and I even mean the government in Washington, D.C., or the entire U.S. government is destroyed, the Bonesmen network will continue to operate."

Jonathan expressed the obvious statement. "But that is what we need to discuss. I need your assistance in the matter."

You're the adviser closest to Kennedy," Odom said. "Isn't that the case?"

Odom shrugged. "I am not National Security Adviser. Kennedy wouldn't have appointed me if he were not going to listen to me."

There will be an emergency session convened. And you will be needed to support the overall thrust of the New World Order.

But know this: your competence has been called into question. How complete fiasco you made of the Cuban invasion.

"If we'd had a few more days and a little more time and force at your disposal, we could have succeeded. Had we been able to use more advanced military resources it would have worked. But our hands were tied and not by the American government. McGeorge Bundy knew," as Odin to his fellow Knights, replied hotly.

"Gentlemen," the German tsk-tsked. "This time you will succeed. I will give you your orders and then be off. I have no desire to stay in this place. Your intelligence services have decided that the Soviet Union's agents, even MI-6 and HUMINT, have discovered your CIA to search for anti-aircraft missiles as well. The Soviets have far more ambitious plans, as you might imagine."

"Surface-to-surface missiles," Bundy said.

The German nodded sharply, once.

"We pee Kennedy knows we know. It has been established per our theses missiles on Cuban soil. He will use the excuse that they are not strategic and do not threaten your nation. This is the course you are to follow. Make certain that he permits the missiles to remain sited."

"Nuclear weapons?" Bundy asked.

The German smiled. "Our mission is to create death and chaos, so that we can take control. Your Bonesmen have taken much control here in the US, but we need to counter that of the Soviet Union as well. They are also well equipped. They boast the same power as one percent of the American capacity. We need more advance to develop."

Bundy looked as if he had encountered a lemon in his Scotch as the German continued with the details. They were ugly, very ugly indeed. No matter what the German's or anyone's perception in this regard, it was going to be terrifying. And dangerous.

But something was out of whack. Memories popped up. Wasn't that one of the attractions at least at twenty and twenty-one when they were tapped? But Odin was no longer close to twenty-one and standing on the shoulders of Giants. He was a living, breathing holocaust, quite another.

"Excuse Mr. Bundy and myself, Odin, but I am not a twenty-one year old. I'm an adult now."

The German shook his head as if dismissing such. Like Americans. Thought the Europeans such fools now and do so indeed. The real

did and they knew they were privy to only part of the First Lodge's master plan for the New World Order. Any thinking adolescent country had far too much power for its own good. The correct outcome of the forthcoming events would establish their arrogance and their pre-eminence in the world.

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Langley, VA, late September 1962

We need another fright," McGeorge Bundy said. Unlike everyone else he wore his usual bespoke suit instead of hold-all gear as he stood in the hangar at Langley Virginia.

The Commander shook his head. "I think Mr Bundy we've shown about the surface to the Soviets. Another missile almost as long as ours knows about the planes we have under the hood over Cuba right now. Your orders, by the way."

Bundy took a step back from the fuselage of the black super long wings of the U-2. The wingtips were pointing in their plane's flight path and higher than he could reach and set for stealth. The German had been quite specific as to the plan that the Order had for Armageddon even in Khrushchev's carefully controlled government. But perhaps the Soviets did not have access to the plans of the Lodge. One disinformation. It happened.

Now Bundy wanted to ensure that it happened again though not quite as the Germans expected. He needed guarantees that no rogue elements from the Agency or Something Else got out of hand and suspected false flags.

The Commander emitted a short bark of laughter as Bundy seemed to be weighing his words to suit the native. In the Commander's view he was also a Bonesman, and knew that meant Bundy was to be given additional weight. As were some members of the CIA. Most of the long-term ministers of consideration were not. Yeah. Average Joes.

Bundy handed over a sheaf of papers from the inside pocket of his jacket. One document was a note to the Commander to duty for the CIA. The rest were soaked orders signed at the highest level. The CIA needed to stay in the power matrix as they always had. They recruited from the Order at the highest levels since it made sense since Bonesmen had put the Agency together at the end of the war. One of the leading bonesmen to be called in had been McGeorge Bundy whose service in the War and as an Intelligen

The war the Germans had lost a fact that had been lost on neither the German Father Lodge nor on the generations of influential Yale men who had been inducted into their ranks. The New World Order belonged to all the sundry Lodges of the Illuminati all over the world but Bonesmen knew that the knew of only a few of them. And that ruling order from the Germans had made a mangled mess higher at both the government and the Order itself.

Now it gazed at the emerging theory of everything. Poetry in flight. Pure beauty. And power. The Germans understood power certainly but they were still suffering the aftereffects of their defeat. And they were right with Kennedy after the Berlin crisis as well since his response to Khrushchev had been weak. Or at least perceived as weak though Bundy knew better. He had spoken to Kennedy during the entire operation and afterwards and had vetted the President's speech.

And since Kennedy was Harvard not Yale I can see that he isn't outmaneuvered and I wasn't able to push him quite as far as you had wanted, so we're not responsible Bundy thought. But still, I don't know quite how it will play out.

But Skull and Bones lodge had taught them well, and Bonesmen were bright Ivy men. At least Bundy was. He hadn't bothered to show the German the ritual room, but that didn't mean that he wouldn't use it.

Bundy had brought Geronimo's skull from the tomb in New Haven. He didn't know quite why he had done it. Geronimo's skull in a glass case in the foyer of the lodge and everyone greeted him as a matter of courtesy.

Some had done over the days he had booked before the boat pulled up to the private pier to take him back to the center of the civilized world. He had burned candles and sacrificed one of the squirrels that ran wild on the island. Capturing it had been the most difficult part of the operation. But in years in Skull and Bones it seemed as though they themselves had extrapolated and experimented to find just the right combination of incense, intoning, and chanting to get the cold warriors of hell to awaken and speak to them. He remembered the first one it had spoken to him, some during a ritual he had done in February of his senior year. He heard the voice. It was as if it were amplified, though none of the others in the ritual appeared to have heard. "You have a great destiny, McGeorge Bundy. You will

save the world and you will be the basis for America's fall. And because of that I am willing to aid you."

He remembered every word, etched into his deepest self. Geronimo had surprised him by revealing to his enemy not his skull and Bones name. And Geronimo spoke no more after that. Until his time. He turned deeper into the forest and the warrior chief spoke for the last time, perfectly this time. "Look to the east to the eagles who will fly against your enemies. Some are old and ready to come home. They shall win this confrontation."

And Lodge One, he had asked. They claim.

The Indian had laughed. "And what have the Germans ever given us. Why should I help you when they slaughtered my people?"

Because it is still your land, where your ancestors are buried, Bundy replied.

Then listen to your heart. Your heart knows what is right. And remember, it is a good day to die."

He might have argued further, even violent. But Bundy honored the ritual and swept out the room as required by the protocol of the working. Then he sat down to eat the Pepperoni pizza he had also picked up at New Haven's Noble Horse to stop the cravings and pass up the pizza.

He checked the time and then slept for six hours. By the time he had showered, shaved and dressed the driver was waiting for him at the pier. He said nothing during the ride to Cuba and the flight back to DC. Much as he thought about the days in Deer Lodge, he was certain of one thing. Geronimo was right. What had the Germans ever given them? After their defeat and the reparations, clearly, but that had happened a hundred years ago and thirty years ago, in 1932. Since that time the Order had held back American power and tried to funnel trading with Nazi funds to support Germany. Not to support the Lodge, but the German government and war effort.

Now Bundy saw things wrong, inexplicably. The German Lodge had set to motion a series of events to stymie their agenda. Or maybe the Germans never set things in motion were complacently certain of the outcome.

Bundy's attention was drawn to the TV. The pictures came on. They had finally posed John McGregor's desk and chair second set up on Bundy's. He had to admit that he was certain of what the

pictur[illegible] showed. To him it looked like groups of people and some[illegible] streets. Maybe rockets made people. The fact was he had no idea. Fortunately, Curtis LeMay had already written an explanation at the end of each. And that explanation said that he was looking at missile transporters. Unmistakably, as the Germans had said.

He picked up the secure phone on one of three on his desk. He was outside in the hallway. His order was clear. No one had no dial. He would until he heard his aid go through. "Mr President."

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Washington D.C., October 19, 1962

We need diplomatic solution. But diplomacy backed by Kennedy was firm. He was cowed. But diplomacy said to correct the Germans of Lodge One we're writing that. No. Lodge One was proudly colonial. Great sort of word. Colonial. Now pre-Revolutionary words. The New World Order. Don't emerge in the Western group as the two superpowers annihilate each other. Or so the German Master had led them to believe.

Now he [illegible] and Taylor and as Advisor on National Security Bundy knew it was time to act. Or rather not to act too rashly. His order had been to push the President to ignore the weapons and threaten peaceful retaliation to the pressure. The Joint Chiefs of Staff had joined Kennedy and Bundy in the Oval Office. The President was angry but still he could see in his mind's eye the group looking across the Mall.

"I showed my men a film of the Soviet Missile Program," the Air Force General said. His face was angry with disillusionment. "We've got the nukes we ought to destroy and we could eliminate the whole island in an hour. Or I could. Khrushchev's bluff. No problem. We could take care of it tonight."

The SS were not involved yet. Admiral Anderson pointed out. "They're still at sea, which makes it easier."

The Air Force General scowled at the Admiral while the Commander-in-Chief Joint Chiefs of Staff General Taylor sat. He covered staring his interest papers after a moment's thought. He said

"No. Mr. Lodge. Bundy said it was so soft that he might have been speaking to himself. That's what he was."

"How do you know I'm here?" McMaster demanded.

The President whipped around at that. "Please gentlemen, let's remember we're all on the same side here."

Admiral Anderson turned red then looked up from his pipe. "We can't let these things end. Once they're in place, Soviet missiles have a shooting range. We need to get rid of them now. Throw the full force of our military at them. The Soviets can't keep them defended or distract and we put a stop to Castro's invasion plans for good." LeMay nodded in agreement. "Nothing with a human at the helm survives a well-placed nuclear weapon, Mr President."

"We don't need to drop a nuke on Cuba to bury the Cubans into the ground," the Air Force general bomber that Kingdom Come in mind. "That means we could talk to the Army to get into place. Curtis LeMay stood up and smiled at the President. "I'll take care of the problem for everyone. I can make one phone call and this would be done in an hour."

LeMay rubbed his hands together and smiled. Bundy shook his head slightly.

"We can't keep them from finding out," Admiral Anderson said. "Maybe we could get Nikita himself the President appeared to consider for a moment. "If we could at least slow them down and give us some time to prepare for the next step. Let me remind you, Mr President, we've got planes and Polaris submarines and we can be in position in only a few hours."

"Blockade," Kennedy agreed.

"Excuse me, sir. But we need to discuss this. We'll be in international waters so we need to get permission from the United American Treaty Organization. I'll write a note from the OAS." He turned to the rest of the group. "But we'll have to be very clear that we're only blockading nuclear weapons. We're not stopping their ships going to put off the food, medicine, etc. I don't think the Soviets are going to back down. This isn't about Cuba. It's about Berlin."

And we can't back down either," Admiral Anderson said. "We can't show them that we're weak. We've got a lot of our allies' confidence with Berlin. We can't afford to lose face to them."

"Berlin? Yeah, that was in there," LeMay agreed. He looked at the Admiral and then pressed his face. "You just jealous because you couldn't do anything to Cuba and blocked it."

"Gentlemen," the President cut them off.

For himself had he not been ordered by the German to push a military solution Bundy might have thought it was the best strategic position to pursue. So few outside the CIA knew how weak the Soviets really were they had far fewer missiles than anyone thought less than a tenth of the US arsenal. The CIA had briefed the Joint Chiefs of Staff about this disparity but the Joint Chiefs kept the numbers quiet. They needed the world to be afraid, needed NATO to be afraid so that they could expand US bases and influence throughout the West.

Moscow looked from its point of view at diplomatic solution would deprive Lodge One of their decision of tacit obedient American forces Bundy knew that second all of the Bonesmen who had ever lived, were out supporting a European agenda. The Germans and the French as well wanted the two superpowers to collide and destroy each other so that the world be left supreme. The German Master had tried to hide this from him but it had been going on for too long and the pattern was unmistakable. It was almost as if Lodge One thought they were idiots to work against their own and the nation's best interest because a group of fellow German migrants decided the ultimate goals of the New World Order.

After all, we were the New World. Bundy had told Geronimos ska later he brushed his Pepes pizza back on Deer Island. Even two days old and warmed over it tasted so much better than any other pizza he had since graduation. "So the New World Order knows as in charge now them. We held Wilson back as they ordered, because the Germans thought that would what that time" he reflected. And the same with Roosevelt. Both wanted to support our allies but that German Lodge used us, and I don't like it. Not one bit.

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At sea, October 22, 1962

The Admiral stood on the bridge of the *USS Coherer* as they steamed along with every ship that had sailed out of Norfolk that morning. The Captain of the ship had been notified in the middle of a family dinner just before the President was due to speak to the nation that he was to accompany the waiting aide and that a jeep was outside. He was to report to the mechanized unit at exactly two hours after the fleet cast off. By the next morning the vessels cruising into position in the

Atlantic. A few hours more and they would take their places in a crescent formation to escort the incoming Soviet delivery.

They hadn't heard the President's speech that evening and had had to wait for a transcript to be flown to them to get the full content. Not that it mattered: they knew where they were going and what their orders were. Left to their own legitimate supplying, the U.S. had no desire to starve the Cuban people or leave them without consumer goods. Only military material would be confiscated.

The Chairman believed that the Soviets would have the good sense to turn back. He did not want to face the necessities that would end the world. He had a family base in Norfolk. So did the Admiral and most of the men aboard. But they would not abandon any circumstances permit the SS-5 missiles to get any closer to Cuba. Even if it did end the world.

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Washington, early morning, October 23, 1962

McGeorge Bundy was still in the White House Situation Room, still wearing the suit he had put on the morning before. He'd managed to splash water and one of the White House staff had brought him a new razor, shaving cream, and a toothbrush. He didn't like the chemical White House toothpaste, but that morning he barely noticed the unpleasant taste.

He'd been awake all night and his stomach burned from a surfeit of coffee and lack of rest. Only his mind was sharply focused. He believed he knew the answer. He'd been staring at it for hours during the night, going back through all the possible combinations.

Kennedy had not seen Bundy since last night. Bundy looked solemnly in the door to the Oval Office and presented himself. The President told him to come in. For all Bundy knew, Kennedy had never left. He appeared to be wearing the same clothes he'd worn yesterday. He had slept for a few hours and eaten a cold breakfast. In fact, he had changed his clothes and his white shirt was perfectly crisp and clean, unlike Bundy's rumpled shirt and crushed tie.

As usual, Kennedy solicitously greeted the President. They had talked once briefly just after midnight when Bundy first brought the news of the Oct. 22 and 23 reconnaissance photographs. Remember the Soviet general that found out the Cubans don't use the

Soviet counter. We need to give Khrushchev something, so he can save face, tell his people he won."

The papers by missiles in Turkey and Italy. Kennedy mused. "I don't want our allies to think that we are backing down that we aren't supporting NATO to the fullest."

Bundy and Dean Rusk thought it was a good gamble. They felt he had to trust them. They knew that we were planning to withdraw those missiles anyway. They're antiquated and besides they know we're planning to replace them with the Polaris."

Yet, if we call their bluff and we get those missiles out and Khrushchev keeps coming, we won't have any choice but to shoot."

Bundy nodded slowly. "All the intelligence we have says that Khrushchev does not want this to go any further, but he has to save face. Our people will think he's weak. He's pretty much backed down and he said they planned to trade West Berlin for the missiles on Cuba. It's always been about Berlin."

Kennedy nodded hopefully. "It never has been about Berlin. What is worth a lot more to Khrushchev than Cuba. So we offer them a trade with the Jupiters in Turkey and Italy that we were going to withdraw anyway?"

Bundy smiled. "Exactly. They don't know the arsenal in those bases is outdated and even if they do, it gives us a reason to say they can stand down and go home. Which they want to do. I don't think they want a nuclear war any more than we do, sir."

Well, don't say that to Curtis LeMay. He'll be very disappointed."

Both the President and his National Security Advisor smiled.

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Washington, D.C., October 27, 1962

McGeorge Bundy knew he had to act. His private line could not possibly be more important now, when the situation had gotten so much worse. Minutes were critical to interrupt them. Indeed, moments after the Turkish government assured Bundy that they were not shooting at the Soviet reconnaissance plane, the Soviets were equally assured that the missiles in Turkey and Italy would be withdrawn. Within a few days, missiles in Turkey and Italy that were aimed at the USSR daily. They could run and hide in Moscow

immediately assuming they were crackpots. Clearly the Peterboro thought so.

Things had almost gone the way Dr. Dupont had been called for peace and his speech was reprinted in full in Pravda.

And then the funny-sounding interpreting machine got out of control and he'd hammered his point home to the brass phone that would not stop ringing. Had it been to stop the invasion, he answered brusquely. If one of the boys was in the emergency room he would be there as soon as Nixon or Brezhnev was good enough to interrupt him now.

What he heard on the other end was a difficult connection and a decided Germanic accent. You're taking Alvord too far, he was told. All you had to do was to support the initiative invasion of Cuba. Kennedy was ready.

Bundy slouched. He almost politely told the German nothing at all, and wondered who had. He went through his list of Bonesmen in the President's circle. Probably not Averell Harriman, while he was Ambassador at Large he stopped by at Last Aerie but had not been involved in most of the NATO MC sessions. Things it was perfectly possible Carl Kaysen could not be clear on, but he'd met Harriman privately. Harriman had previously dealt with Stevie. No doubt he knew more about how to get Soviet missiles out of Cuba than almost anyone closer to the President. Bundy turned and stormed right out of Khrushchev from Harriman. But no, not Harriman.

Perhaps it was the Williamses. Bundy considered. William seemed a likely source. William was no longer in analysis at the CIA. These days he worked for the Secretary of the Navy, and that's where he probably heard. Dr. Thomas Williamson had always been loyal to Skull and Bones in a huge, frantic way. Mac knew that to and his brother never talked about their feelings about their various orders from the Illuminati. Even how close they were. Because aside from their work and their connection with Eggleston as Mac's detection from the Brit Ledge program.

Still, hearing Cuba in the news made his hands clammy and his stomach knot. Even now, this much knowledge about the Cubans had made missiles likely invented.

You're not as smart as you think you are attempting what you have not done? How would you feel about defection? Under what circumstances will be most dire for defection."

Mac had made a cool rational decision when he planned to defy Lodge One and force a break with the Germans. He thought he understood all the consequences and his own responsibility and he knew he was right. But something inside of him was with the Germans' threat. Suddenly the fetus curled and it contained nothing—nothing at all—for the German Illuminati who had founded his own Order in 1890. He felt in his gut as if he could see the past and the future clearly as Geronimo did, as the rituals taught. Even the anger that had consumed him when he realized the Illuminati plan included the sacrifice of America's best athletic prospects cooled.

Power flowed through him, the power of the ritual and the dark Hun power in the outer world, in the government only reflected the greater power within. He'd never doubted his extreme intelligence but now something else grew as well. He slowly lay the receiver on his desk. He could hear the German shouting over interference from the international cable and he simply no longer cared.

Just as Lodge One didn't care for them. For all that the members of Skull and Bones over the centuries had zealously adhered to and financed the Fatherland program, the Germans and the French too had never cared much about them. Now they cared about Berlin and US support and were looking to privately to Kennedy. But Mac had known Jack's secret. They had been boys together back in Brookline and he knew what Kennedy had considered every action he took entirely from the view of the good of the United States. As he had sworn to do—even though when he took that oath he knew that it conflicted with his duty to the Illuminati. And his loyalty to Skull and Bones, which went much deeper.

Bundy picked up the receiver and heard his own words as if it were someone else speaking. *Nothing. My loyalty to the Bones is unshaken. I have embarked on a course of action and I will succeed.*

As you succeeded before with the invasion of Cuba? the German sneered at him.

Bundy hung up without reply and then checked the grandfather clock in the office to find a message of Skull and Bones from all the Knights to keep perfect time and now it read seven to four. Kennedy had called a meeting at noon with the Joint Chiefs and his advisors including Attorney General Dean Rusk and Robert McNamara. It was now or never. He had to act quickly and then once the President

ordered they send a message to U Thant the Secretary General of the United Nations saying that U Nu order and supervise dismantling the Soviet missile sites and that he pursue a plan for the solution

He said he was continuing this history lesson moment when a buzz knock interrupted him. Without waiting for an invitation General Maxwell Taylor entered and saluted. "We shot at noon today one of our U-2s was shot down over Cuba by an SA-2. We believe the pilot Major Rudolf Anderson was killed.

"Gentlemen Mr. Khrushchev said that if they took any more provocative actions we would retaliate and he threatened that war at them. We're ready to go in. One phone call and Cuba will be history. Like we should have done to the Russian ships in Berlin. Nuke 'em till they glow."

Neil Bundy said the air was so electric it was as if his thoughts had drifted into the meeting and as the lights otherwise was absorbed. Khrushchev wrote a letter to Kennedy. We've got a piece of messages from him..."

"Which we don't know if we're actually going to receive from him" interrupted LeMay.

"Dean was told that Khrushchev was going to send at least one letter from him and that it was the most important letter. We rushed it up here and he began reading it to us in the Situation Room.

"I already had a copy of it by the time Bundy didn't say it was very important. I read it and thought that it had been right.

"We were going to do it. We don't update it. I asked if it was the reminded them of the Soviets. We've been at Khrushchev's boat's chairs represented a tough talk. Turning on us and NATO. We had a chance to show that we'll take down this if you don't do it we're going to [illegible] Soviet missile and gate plane out there."

"We got a letter from Khrushchev about Khrushchev will accept the proposal to [illegible] from Russia. Living [illegible] missiles in Cuba with [illegible] are pointed to be [illegible] in the [illegible] of the [illegible] to see [illegible] the [illegible] and [illegible]. The second [illegible]

He [illegible] at [illegible] and [illegible] me was [illegible] the future and the past [illegible] and [illegible] in the empty [illegible] on Deer Island

Suddenly LeMay sneered "Mr President you said that if they shot at us we would go for the full invasion plan. This is just Soviet stalling and trickery and I say we hit them with it now before they've got total control over every inch of Cuba. Believe you just saw it the Soviets are going to escalate and from there they can get more and more. Now's the time to get the call and we've kept fighters steamed up the whole time this whole thing's started. We could take out their bases before dinnertime."

Kennedy stood and looked at each of the men gathered around the table. "If there was any guarantee that we could take out their bases by dinnertime. We're going to try one last round of negotiations. Bobby will meet with Dobrynin and our offer to remove missiles is delivered privately as quickly as possible."

"If the boys could take the flak" the Attorney General said.

The President closed his eyes for a moment and Bundy thought he looked very old now pissed over but that made him look like an ancient man trying to hold all the weight of the world. Then Kennedy nodded. "All the Chiefs assembled in a row to his left. I don't believe in luck or other but we have to try. While we wait for his answer you gentlemen who began to draw up the invasion plans."

"And we need to plan for a new government" Rusk added. "If we take down Castro we're going to need one."

John F. Kennedy looked drained. But he knew that they all knew war was coming up and only Curtis LeMay smiled brightly like a toddler on Christmas morning who just unwrapped the very best toy ever. "Gentlemen we prepare for war. And we will pray for peace."

Bundy did more than pray that night he went home for a few hours. After the call he was at his desk by six. He was able to bend down to the unfinished basement without any comment. There he lit candles and murmured the ritual words. He missed Grey terribly but he felt the rightness of the ritual as a balm.

After he finished the opening gesture on the cottman he had placed in the middle of the carpet and stepped to the gate. There he finished and closed the portal and was dazed with what had happened. He went upstairs and turned on the TV.

And the Chief Clerk materialized behind him out of the fog. He was full grown and held a bow in one hand and a [illegible] in the other. On

his back a full bag of quarrels rested next to a long fill of eagle feathers. You crazy white bear. You think I'm going to let my son die from Germans win? Not today. That's not going to happen today. Now you go to sleep and tomorrow you'll get world at peace. And stop bothering me. I'm an old man and I'm not one of yours. Let me stay with my people. Leave me alone."

Then the screen erupted into a display of color and went dead. McGeorge Bundy stood and shook his head. He was exhausted and worried about more than if NCOMM would ever know. And yet now he felt almost dismissive of the view that Geronimo spoke the truth.

Tomorrow the world could be at peace.

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Deer Island, Thanksgiving, 1962

You should have come back before you went off on your own. You could have helped me. And I've made a terrible mess. Now you've single-handedly made me the laughingstock of the Order," William Bundy said. The recent losses between the two of them were more than remarkable in career and background as well as face and form.

"We need to win," Harvard said. "We always then at need to. But I think that we can't afford to come to the end of the semester and not announce our big win with Lodge. One. Once we show the kings of the Order that we're back, I don't think we'll have any trouble gaining a majority."

"You just won't get on the Fourth Order of Adonis," William Bundy wasn't done yet.

The size of the struggle was a bigger problem. Lodge had taken over a separate apartment in the Lodges where their wives shared the cooking and the children scampered outside. Secrets in the Islands proved the three men had at least one big secret matter. A little Thanksgiving secret together. They perched at most desks and tried to make most of the wooden chairs fit their most traditional American selves. No one knew for sure but knew why these three men met alone. The Fourth Lodge's Savage was watching a ball game.

When it's some way resembled McGeorge Bundy thought only no one could agree on which was the whole side.

It was time, he said. "The Germans have been using us all along. And maybe we'll have to fight a little harder without their support."

"We're at war with opposite them, you mean." William Bundy had not finished griping at his brother.

"But once this project is over," Mac said again. "Why should we take over. The Germans have lost one after time and we've backed and funded them, and not to our benefit might I add. We've been ready to break with them since before the War, and now we'll we have."

"There is fur us with us," Harriman pointed out. "Which may not be so bad. We no longer need Old World backstage for the New World Order."

"Exactly. And Amen," Mac Bundy said raising his glass.

"Well, since we don't have to serve," grouse William, but he raised his glass with the others. "Happy Thanksgiving."

"Happy America. We're in charge."

"Turkey's just about ready," Mac Bundy yelled down the hall. "Anyone hungry?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sherman Lawrence graduated Yale University. Other works include novels *Tales from the Underground* and *Conspiracy!* "Lawrence's prose is as wide as the depths she capably plumbs."

ONE NIGHT IN BAVARIA

by Debra Doyle & James D. Macdonald

Part of a series of related Regency stories

The lookout tower above the Swansea docks was cold and gray, its granite walls streaked with rain. Inside, Lord Burton sat contemplating the lake. He coughed and turned away into a linen pocket handkerchief.

In the next parish, James and Lucy Rhodes of Hertford Street had received their first communication on a sailing vessel bound for New South Wales. Their son was meant to live for two years with a shepherd on the outskirts of the Cape settlement, hoping thereby to escape the consumption that was the family curse.

A second letter had been received by a packet just before the intended departure, a letter that now lay crushed under an iron weight in the hand of Lord Burton, who *should have been* on his way to the Kingdom of Bavaria where Lucy's cousin Ludwig awaited him with open arms and unlimited quantities of schnapps, the doctor's only possible cure.

He gazed across the lake at the small cluster of cottages that made up the village of Penclawdd, the oystermen's boats pulled up on the beach. Gossip from the port of New South Wales would seem highly improbable. He himself had as a child been dosed with digitalis and other medicines of varying power, and he knew better than to hope for a brief Cornish interval and a return to his round house at the Cape.

He [illegible] and [illegible] he proceeded to the south of Bava[illegible] and the royal [illegible] Castle where he was [illegible] by His Majesty King Ludwig [illegible] repeatedly [illegible] Once there he was given [illegible] commissions and [illegible] [illegible] the suspicion that he had [illegible] the target of an obscure joke on the part of some person unknown. [illegible] and [illegible] promised to call [illegible] afternoon.

The day was pleasant with the [illegible] temperatures with which Bava[illegible] is blessed in September, and as Cecil's thoughts turned to the proposed evening's entertainment [illegible] he [illegible] decided [illegible] that he would be possible for him to [illegible] [illegible] he was [illegible] as well as lucky to hear a sound amid the [illegible] [illegible] Suddenly [illegible] [illegible] with [illegible] like [illegible] bone. He wondered who [illegible] was wandering the woods that day.

Soon a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] with [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] with [illegible] [illegible] and sideburns in the Russian fashion [illegible] into the clearing. He was walking at a [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] A wide-brimmed white straw hat covered his head. The newcomer marched straight backed to where the Englishman waited. Cecil stood to greet him politely as he had been taught.

Hello there, German," the older man said speaking in that language.

Good enough, I suppose," Cecil said, also in German before continuing in his own tongue. How is your English?

Good enough, I suppose," he said, adopting the tongue of the Britons. Then we shall get on.

My name is," Cecil began, starting to offer his hand.

No names. It is not important. Please, call me Tacitus. You can call me…Tacitus, if you must call me anything."

Well, Cecil said, extending his hand. It's a pleasure to meet you, Tacitus. You may call me Murray, if you must call me anything.

Please, let us not exchange gifts. Tacitus said. I am not here to offer you wealth and power."

"Such offers seldom come without cost," Cecil said. This man, he thought through all of his acquaintance, must surely be the unknown letter writer. "You'll be wanting my soul, I suppose?"

"No. I have no use for it. I just want you to give me the world."

Cecil laughed. It was high that turned into a coughing fit. "Sorry," he finally said, when he was able to speak. The word sat wrong to give. He paused for a moment, raising counsel to his often-overconvictions, and added, "At least, not yet."

"I choose my words carefully, sir. And I will be sure to tell you if you give me your word that you will do as I say."

"And if I refuse?"

The soldier narrowed his eyes, getting to the lips that had no humor in it. "I said Mutti has other sons. Hitler should not consumption far from home, nicht wahr?"

The general's brother-in-law's kindness to the other Cecil pondered, briefly, on the nature of oaths sworn under duress and said, "In that case, I agree."

"Very well. Wait for our instructions." From within his coat the man withdrew a small, black leather-bound volume, as thin as it was high, with an eyelet sewn into it and a length of red cord looped through it. "Keep this with you. You leave tomorrow. And tell your cousin—"

"Cecil accepted the book. It was heavy in his hand."

"—the Russians have the power."

He turned to the door. "For this price," Cecil started, then turned to face the man by the door to the castle. The exposure was short now, lost in the gray of the night, but Cecil was suddenly eager to see it. He had no doubt that he would learn the Russians' true name.

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High above, on the crumbling wall of the castle that would one day be called Wewelsburg, the hammering continued, the sound of the workers' names echoed over the hills. A tall, dark man stood beside the workers on the wall, and from the piles of brick stood around him, ordered in his head. His voice, the booming and severe command behind the soft tones of the words he spoke to the foreman.

"How is it going, Franzel?"

"Moldering well, Herr Major. Quicker than I would have thought. The steam engine has not been functioning as they predicted, but I would have

I I have it seen to." The king, for it was he, robed up his copy of the p ons and made his way down the mountain alone. He had a reception that he must attend that evening, hosted by in honor of the visiting Minister President of Prussia, which he had to prepare for by lying quietly in bed and listening to music played from behind the screen. Or so he said he would do, none of the musicians would know or he would and the music would guard my voices from the ears of servants.

Secrets to have servants was like having spies in one's own household, searching each room each day, listening to every conversation, seeing each face. Remembering. Noting what letters came and went, to whom they were addressed. Even how much ink was used from day to day.

Ludwig entered the castle and made his way to his apartment, locking the door behind him. When he was alone in his inner chamber, a secret door opened and an elderly, aged Prussian, the one who had spoken to Rhodes not an hour past, stepped through.

Tacitus. King Ludwig said. Thank you for responding so readily to my summons."

We serve the same master," the Prussian replied, speaking in a low tone while unseen musicians played selections from *Die Walküre*. If you summoned me, it was by his order, and it was by his order that I came."

You did well provoking war with France," the king continued as if the man had not spoken. The book says the next step is to discredit the communism that will grow after the loss of their Emperor. I can ensure that, but only if you take Paris. Can you promise me that much?"

By January at the latest," the Prussian said.

"See to it," said Ludwig.

Per aspera ad astra," that was how the Order did its work. On what the Founder had ever written anything down in a master book that described the future history of the world, and what he wrote was both command and prophecy.

I have contacted the other conspirators," Tacitus said. He has, *Per aspera*. Skoll and Wurm, I recall. He goes by the name of Mutu.

Very well. Each plan moves forward. By the end of the century, the grand work, unifying the world under *Per aspera ad astra*, will be complete.

The two men nodded to one another although Tacitus looked as if he had bitten down on a sour chestnut at hearing the word Bavarian and the secret door slid shut behind the Prussian as he departed.

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The reception that night was a glittering affair. In the ballrooms, the salons, the entryways, the ladies chattered and the men smoked, the orchestra played, and the waiters carried champagne, brought from France by Cecil Rhodes's servants, through all the hall.

Cecil Rhodes scanned one of the rooms through which the guest of honor was announced: the royal name of his tactitas Herr Otto von Bismarck, Minister President of Prussia. There are no secrets in the world Cecil thought. He heard too that the king was now present, but did not see. His Majesty Mary of Prussia, the king's mother, performed the hostess duties. Cecil felt not unduly out of place—an Englishman among Germans, a youth among men of mature years, a years scholar among the old boys—for he was grateful to be merely ignored rather than scorned. Whatever the unseen qualities in him that might have prompted the author of his invitation, it drawn the attention of von Bismarck or the others were not valued here.

At the earliest opportunity Cecil withdrew. He could hardly retire to his bedroom not without risk of fleeing and making a scandal, but surely there would be some place in his vast residence where he would have plausible reason to be alone. He found up at last in a library where a single lamp was burning, although the fireplace was lit. Before the kindling had caught, Cecil's wheelchair-backed couch stood before the cold hearth. Cecil judged it such to be both comfortable and private, and so retired himself upon its horsehair cushions. Soon he fell asleep.

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He woke shortly—or so it felt. Before he consulted his watch to see how long, to the sound of a voice speaking, in Bavarian-accented German, "I come to you, master, for instruction."

He heard the sound of a door locking open, followed by a rustle of cloth and the muffled noise of a heavy object placed gently on a table. Cecil raised his head above the back of the couch and saw a tall, slender man in his mid-twenties as he prepared to draw the

cup that he had apparently brought with him. A handsome man with dark wavy hair and a narrow beard along his jaw, he wore on his coat an enameled decoration of the Order of the Bavarian Crown, with four blue and silver lozenges of Bavaria. Cecil recognized him at once from pictures. This was Ludwig the Second, King of Bavaria.

He turned at the open door to the library to see before him the heavy object he had won from it was likely a view of the man sheathed alone with the setting sun in a triangle atop a sunburst etched in gold. Beneath the crown, Cecil watched the king lifted a thick volume from the box, thumbed a book here and there, was apparently the covered boards.

Ludwig opened the book to a page marked with a ribbon. He read the page, then looked up to the ceiling, turned the cut-leaf to the next page across, and gently closed the book. Only then did the king look at Cecil. He lifted the book and placed it back in the box, then placed the shield in the box on top of it.

He closed the box, locked it, and placed the box back on a shelf. A fast flurry of books went onto the shelf covering the box. He then bowed his head, mumbled some words that Cecil could not hear, then turned, opened the door, and exited.

The door closed behind him.

Cecil waited hardly during to breathe, knowing that no one should ever know what he had witnessed. A hundred heartbeats passed. Then two hundred. Only then did he rise and walk silently to the door. He paused, his hand on the lever. Then he pushed down, the door opened, and he stepped out into the hall.

"I was wondering when I would see you," said a voice from the shadows beside a portrait of a statue of Minerva's owl. A pause, and then a sound of muted laughter. Then a gas lamp illuminated the face. "You're beautiful."

Lord Mycroft had said the same greeting had been used on Cecil before, but not so much so as to wear the curiosity which remained since Lord Mycroft's departure from England.

"Ah, yes. Let us walk and talk a bit."

The hallway they were in was lined with windows. It ended at a set of high glass doors that opened onto a balcony overlooking the courtyard and the forest beyond.

The view is lovely Cecil said Even by night

"Yes This is the most pleasant part of the kingdom and my kingdom is the most pleasant part of the world But still I must know how much did you see and what do you know

In response Cecil cracked it to reveal its pocket piled with the little carved skulls and placed it on the ornamented balustrade

I was given this by a man who offered me power in exchange for the world when I should have it."

It were to address a god Vaclav would that name have meaning

Cecil nodded.

And the offer you spoke of I see that you agreed to meet

"I agreed that it would be as his actions said, as said tonight I were to die so far from home and time What else could my words mean but acceptance of his offer is not for me to say

I see Ludwig was often in your company The Master instructed me to find some use for the particularities of mind I am happy to learn that it is you."

My knowledge was imperfect Cecil responded Who is the Master and how does he instruct us in great daring, that is but tonight he left with a night to our greatest and to what end?

"The Master will speak to us when he chooses He is the human who still speaks to us through instruction and prophecy It be said after his death Victory is the unification of the world under one government to be the grasp of the clergy in the name of peace and the perfection of mankind

We observed Cecil and I had not his knowledge to wisely talk aloud what secrets and which language would best serve the most place in that peaceable unity

I took one of the apples and the ring and held out his hand When speaking of the Master with these apples I called Agamemnon Come it is return to the party before we are missed

You will be missed perhaps No one will miss me

Ludwig missed Do not say so Victor is the gentleman will wonder."

Together they returned by way of the dark hallway to the grand ballroom As they entered I whispered Cecil Trust I warn you your Majesty, do not trust me."

"Oh, do not fear. I don't."

W[illegible] at the threshold they parted ways. The young Englishman remained at the wharf as long as decorum demanded, then returned to his guest suite as the clocks chimed the midnight hour.

The morning brought a scratching at the door. The light was still grey, the sun was not yet up. He sat up, threw off the bedclothes and drew on a dressing gown before making his way to the door and opening it. A servant stood waiting, a young woman in cap and apron, her eyes cast down.

Guten Abend, she said. "Please, a gentleman wishes to speak to you."

"I shall dress."

"He says not to bother, but to come at once."

She led and Cecil followed her down the stairs to the grand hall, thence to a small room beside the entrance to the *Schloß*, where stood Bismarck, once again in his greatcoat with his travelling trunks and boxes beside him.

"I say this is most personally," Bismarck said. "Leave at once today. We have a contact on Yeddo and your fortunes much improved." His minister wore the eight-pointed cross of the Order of St Joan at his left breast. He reached inside his coat and produced a buff envelope. "You are expected on a steamer from Hamburg at which place you will rejoin Capetown at the same time that the sailing vessel on which you were to sail arrives from England." He handed the envelope to the young man. "I won't see you go with God because God has no part of this."

A trap pulled up at the door and as servants loaded his luggage aboard it, the minister himself entered the vehicle and settled back without another glance at either Cecil or the castle.

Cecil stood in his dressing gown for a moment, not moving or waiting for him to tip the hat. "I must be away at once," Cecil said. "Please pack my luggage and arrange conveyance to the nearest railway station."

As you say," the valet replied. But when Cecil returned to his room he found Hadley himself waiting for him inside.

"Leave this," he said. "I forbid it." At last, with a laugh, "not until after breakfast."

The two walked together to the king's private chambers. A clever arrangement brought a real Italian trattoria up through a trapdoor in the floor, without any servant in sight.

I suppose it will be a surprise to you that the man who gave you that worthless ticket was carrying with him the Swedish chancellor," Ludwig began, pouring tea into some china cups and handing one to Cecil. "Knowing how short you are and knowing his reputation, do you now find yourself tempted by his offer?"

What would not be tempted," said Cecil, "by the vision of a new order for the world?"

And who would not, in head or churchyard, he added to the privacy of his own thoughts, when the world offered to the daring opportunities never in the existence to meet with kings and ministers with the fate of nations at stake?

The king grinned back. "I suppose that for a young man it would be an exciting prospect. But I am seven years older than you are right now, when I was crowned. You know. Everything became possible."

Not unlike passing boats to be kings and ride in triumph through Persepolis?" Cecil said in English.

Come, let us not exchange the powers of heaven and set back streamers in the firmament to signify the slaughter of the gods," Ludwig replied in the same tongue. He leaned forward. "What do you want?"

He answered the question quickly to Cecil's lips and honestly. "To do great things."

Ludwig said, "Speed, I may have come out and shown you that same attitude you showed to me, that will be seen to take his orders seriously. You will receive general suggestions drawn up by the Red Line down. Where perhaps a specific one is such-and-such a city, invest this man's pounds sterling in our mutual company."

It strikes me," Cecil said, aware that he was young and by no means good at speaking directly to a crowned monarch, "that doing so means that my attempts to gain control matter but those of some other, some spider pulling the threads of the web, not me."

Ludwig gestured with his teacup. "We part ways, have all thought the same thing. But there is still plenty of room for personal

achievement. Exactly how to carry out a work that is often left to one's discretion. And even how one treats a corpse is not scripted. You may have to be creative and do your best effort to cover up to avoid. Plenty of room for greatness."

Cecil thought for a moment. Bishop Ingewine had given me much the same instructions, only with less assurance and more threats attached.

Then came conflict. Ludwig said Otto is the sort to prefer the weapon of the spy, while Agent Renard would do as well. Do you see the problem?

Hot Cecil wondered. He only got about halfway into breaking off from a conversation with Ludwig before he had to get to Artois to get on with his role. Ludwig solved the problem for him by standing up, walking over to the wall, and removing this evening's meal and walking out through a door concealed in the side of the room. The door closed behind him with a sign of his presence while Cecil dabbed his lips with his napkin and turned with more than his usual tradition to peer behind him.

I suppose the agent that his opponent would count as well commend Artois to Ludwig of Bavaria, your enemy, your sovereign, is none the less a sovereign and a worthy adversary.

Cecil retraced his path through the castle to the great hall and from there to his guest room. He found his bags packed and a man standing by them.

I am not necessary, he said to me, in the German tongue. "I'll be staying overnight."

The man merely bowed his head in acknowledgment before leaving out of the room and closing the door behind him.

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Cecil spent the remainder of the morning wandering the woods from the castle down to the shores of the lake, where the swans that gave their name were swimming boldly knowing they were under the king's protection. He had a basket packed by the castle staff with a picnic lunch, and he ate it with relish.

Later in the afternoon, as the sun was starting to dip, a bugle call drew Cecil back to the castle. High above on the ramparts, the voices of the guards were audible, but their voices did not carry.

He thought of what he had seen in the library of the boss: the book he had read, the letter he had written, and he answered his own purpose. There was no harm in that, of course. What does that excuse, he wondered? Perhaps the Bavarian would be as good for nothing as the rest. Alright, the stay here. No, there was no point to that. He was wrong, and princes and ministers enough.

Cecil started to hurry after Sir *Lancelot*, but then he got slowly past the second-to-last one, and he was interesting from the second one of the last one, and he was the same but when he had to be right, but he had to be alone and unobserved.

He took a sip of his drink and looked at the other guests. None of what he saw all of them much. He came to the coffee that came after supper was placed in front of the cream. The state of his lungs forbid him to go to the smoking room just as his natural repulsion to smoke made him remove from the company of others.

He looked to the terrace to Alice's seat in his pocket. They did not have to be out of sight and to count but he was desirous to keep them out of the sight of the boat. The Scots would not be able to see anything worthy of no more than middling ancestry.

A man with a red face and a cognac tipped his head down the road. He had a small mustache and a pale face and said in a low voice. A servant took the same room where you first saw her last night. I would like to be left alone away without waiting for an answer.

Cecil's response was to turn to the right, and he ran out of the apparent wide wings and to the left of the hall was where the door to the room he had left closed door. And he was at the top of the stairs to the second moonlight from the window and the floor the floor.

He looked at the door and the door and stepped through.

Two men took inside the room. He had a lot of questions. Ludwig, tall, young, handsome, and Bavarian

old, grey, bald. Unseen musicians played on the strings and horns filling the room.

"You asked me to attend you," Cecil said to King Ludwig. Then to Bismarck: "I thought this you had gone."

"You were meant to think so," Bismarck replied, breaking the music-filled silence that had followed the young brother's words.

"I think I'll stay," Cecil said. He took two more paces into the room.

No boy stood on the table. If the kingdom's monster had come here to consult the Master's wisdom, they had not done so yet.

Cecil comprehended the truth at once. This was his own test, though Ludwig or Bismarck knew that it was so. Until he possessed the wisdom and the audacity to act now, in the moment of need, he was not for nothing more than to tend a farm or preach sermons. With more physical effort that he had expended in years, he sprinted across the room to the bookcase where the box was hidden. With a sweep of his arm he hung aside the concealing volumes and snatched out the casket.

He smashed the wooden container onto the floor, breaking it apart. Inside it found the book. Cecil picked up the book and opened it. "What is this?" he cried.

"Nothing that would be of help to you," Ludwig replied. "Not for many years."

"I do not wish to know what it says," Cecil said and dashed the volume into the fireplace. Another swing of his arm and the paraffin lamp from the library table followed it. The milk glass shattered, spilling the oil over book and tinder alike and the logs came roaring to life. The pages of the book caught fire as Cecil snatched up a poker from the rack of tools beside the stone hearth, the better to defend his desecration.

"I make my own future," he said.

"You fool," Bismarck said. "You pitiful blundering fool."

"No," Ludwig said, laying his hand on Bismarck's arm. "The Master knew this too. All the rest of the pages were blank."

"You peeked?"

"I had a certain curiosity as to how the play would end. There to Cecil: "You had better leave. By the time you reach the great hall, a carriage will be waiting. Be on your way."

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Later that night, on the train from Euston to Munich, Cecil leaned back, eyes closed, and rested his head against the scarred brass compartment.

The song had lied. Love was a gentleman—perhaps out of fondness for its English guest, perhaps simply to avoid the Prussians in the rest of the book's pages had not in fact been blank. Written in an obscure script, perhaps—but nothing Cecil could not puzzle out with the key to the future—to an *Engländer*, and kept out of the hands of the right person, spelled out in its lines. And two leaves from the book were blank, save for a thin, open knife cabinet that afternoon, now in Cecil's breast pocket, next to his steamship ticket to the Cape.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[illegible] Parker [illegible] in far northern New England. She has a [illegible] from the University of [illegible] and studied [illegible] with [illegible] and [illegible] Macdonald [illegible] *Response*, both forthcoming from Tor Books.

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EVERY LITTLE BIT

by Steven Popkes

Just what's a conspiracy theory FOR?

Tom Easton hadn't told anyone about the idea that he had. He hadn't invited any authors. He'd scribbled it on a napkin and talked it over with his coffee. He'd never had to bring it up with any actual writers. Not until it was a done deal. Although, things worked out while he was at Arisia enough so that a few authors. If he met the right ones.

An eight-foot Ghostbuster walked up to the table at Starbucks. Tom looked up, his eyes scanning the emblem on her proton pack, following the wiring and tubes from pack to gun, pausing at the trigger.

Is this the end of fun, Ghostbuster asked.

Round the corner from, pointed and hard.

Ghostbuster gave him the exact meaning look of someone for whom coffee was a necessity, not a treat and not a luxury. You're hiding me."

Tom shrugged. "Afraid not."

Ghostbuster looked over her shoulder, walked off towards the convention suite for free coffee.

Tom returned to writing, pleased with the way he was taking care of his idea for an upcoming anthology.

A perfect stranger stepped in front of him and said, "An anthology of conspiracy stories. A very good idea."

Tom was pleased with the thought that he'd had a well groomed white beard. He wasn't exactly sure what it meant. He wanted to see who had spoken.

The man looked up at him, wide eyes in magnifying glasses, a wrinkled face the color of dark. There was a pattern to his check. Tom was pretty confused. *Are we having a hive and a page?*

The man spoke earnestly. "You should do it. It's a good idea. It will sell well."

"What are you talking about?"

"The conspiracy anthology. It will be fun."

Tom had written science fiction, critiqued it, or read it for most of his life. So he had a healthy respect for the division between fiction and reality. Therefore, he wasn't quite sure how this man could have such a twisted mind. He must have been muttering about it as he stood in line.

"Do I know you?" asked Tom. Possibly he'd mentioned it in passing to someone.

"Not at all. Herbert Sheckley. Like the author, but completely unrelated." Herbert held out his hand.

Tom took it. "Tom Easton."

"Oh, I know that." Herbert winked at Tom.

"Sir?" asked the woman at the counter.

Tom ordered coffee and waited for it as Herbert ordered.

"Triple mocha latte with extra whipped cream," Herbert said enthusiastically. "Can you add basil?"

The barista stared at him.

"Never mind." Herbert gave her a warming smile.

I have a feeling it would warm nothing, thought Tom. *And she has picked it up.*

"I'm a fan of *our* work, Doctor Easton," said Herbert as he waited. Tom at the pickup counter for his latte.

"Sorry," Tom said as he took his coffee. "I'm late for a panel."

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Boston hosts the granddaddy of science fiction conventions each year. Arisia in January is the liveliest of the three with lots of people dressed in costumes, artists supplying accoutrements to those people, and panels supporting them in their pursuits, whether it be the best way to sew on sequins or how to manage a new relationship. As Tom walked across the lobby towards the Accord room, he saw a man dressed as a gargoyle, complete with six foot long wings, a

woman demonstrating the best way to make a small, and an earnest [illegible] between three men and two women.

Tom spent two hours in the meeting, getting a feel for the developments in the industry. As he sat down and waited for the room to fill, Herbert Sheckley sat in the front row.

Herbert smiled at him.

Tom nodded back. He was used to being followed by trios from the convention. A woman with three breasts sat down next to Herbert but Herbert didn't seem to notice.

[illegible] spoke with the publishers that morning and decided to start mentioning [illegible] prospective authors he knew Sterling would be interested. Making sure they realized the author had not been [illegible]. Across the theater's room, he saw Herbert look over a collection of [illegible]. There was no mistaking him.

Herbert looked up at him and waved.

Tom waved back.

Herbert [illegible] to examining the [illegible].

Hmmm. The [illegible] to the speech in the second hour contained [illegible]. After the [illegible] Tom could see [illegible] at as much of the BDSM trade as he did to dressing people like [illegible]. Apparently [illegible] zippers were important.

But it bothered him.

He opened [illegible] on his phone and looked up Herbert Sheckley's Notary Network [illegible]. He knew [illegible] people who [illegible] business he knew nothing about [illegible] them knew him.

He could just ask Herbert.

But what [illegible] look up Herbert [illegible]?

[illegible] Reactions bounced between [illegible] interested and curious. Curious offered him a story right then and there.

[illegible] the seat behind him. This [illegible] corner of the [illegible]. A certain mystery [illegible] people [illegible] conversation.

Tom saw Herbert standing in front of the Starbucks in the [illegible] and came up behind him. It seemed [illegible]

As he approached Herbert turned around. "Doctor Easton! It's good to see you." He reached out his hand.

Tom shook it. It was cold and wet to the touch. He threw Calhoun's Tom didn't expect it. There were no group tickets, swing tags or Herbert memorized his bride. It was a staple judge of attendance.

"You have a remarkable memory, Mister Sheckler. I know about your [illegible] psychic energy. I am impressed."

"Of course. How could you know so much about me? Let's get my latte and we can talk."

Herbert ordered. "Triple shot in Latte with extra whipped cream. This time with *cinnamon!*"

As he waited for Herbert stirred his cup. "It's good to taste stuff and not feel things again. But so I can't taste basil, saffron or garlic." He sighed. "Time changes tastes."

They sat down at the table next to the door. It was still morning and Boston seemed at the civil practice of not serving alcohol at all hours of the night. Herbert sat down at one of the tables and gestured for Tom to sit down as well. He sipped his latte.

"Hot pepper in chocolate." Herbert said. "I wonder if they have hot pepper latte. I'd love to taste that again."

"Herbert," Tom started. "How did you know about the conspiracy anthology?"

"I read your mind, of course."

"You can't do that."

"Of course not. But I had you for a minute, didn't I?" Herbert laughed. "You move your lips a little when you are thinking. I thought the word 'conspiracy' and 'anthology' and 'I know your work.' It wasn't a hard deduction."

Tom was surprised to find it was a weak trick but disappointed. Tom's normal assumption to himself was to be underestimated. Herbert was the first time Tom saw the possibility of a contemporary psychic and it turned out to be a dud. You're bound to be disappointed.

Tom looked at his watch. There was nothing pressing until after lunch. Well, Herbert's idea was a good idea.

"Conspiracies are a good idea. A good idea. And they don't support them is, by that virtue, a good idea as well."

Tom snorted. "Conspiracies are pretty simple things in the real world."

Herbert sipped his brew. He gummed it and nodded. He nodded toward Tom. "Tom, I would have to agree. Conspiracies themselves are almost always bad things. Conspirators commit crimes. Terrorists. Dictators. Cops. I was right to conspire *them*. They are real bad guys.

"But how do you get people to conspire to do something that's good? How can you possibly say that?"

Herbert rubbed his hands and put them down on the table. "Do you think me *mad*, Tom? Is that it? Shall I be tucked?"

"Why would they want to?"

For the first time, Herbert caught on. He took a reason. I should just bring my own. He put down his mug. He met my question. Humans were through. Everyone constructed the thousand years ago there couldn't have been a lot of people. Thousands, maybe. Dozens. I really thought we would learn more. Cities. It was almost completely homogeneous genome. What's the most variation you've found?" He looked at me, sipped, stood, sat down.

Mister Sheik. Tom's dad. Who he voted, supposed to be?

Herbert set it aside. I'm the last surviving member of an extinct subspecies of human. He took off his glasses. Without the distortion of the lenses, his eyes looked small and bare in an odd way. He wiped at them with the palm of his hand. Tom looked to sign. Herbert stopped. "I don't think I'm up to it here. No acting. Herbert's mood to create is not in the sadness. The [illegible] to humans as [illegible] they

[illegible] Tom's eyes were down to get [illegible] character. It's [illegible] game of costumed [illegible] ever seen. But I'd play along for a while.

Herbert nodded. "We [illegible] New [illegible] called ourselves [illegible] moment the straightened up. [illegible] last of Lonesome George, the last of [illegible] despair, did he?"

"Lonesome George?"

I met his own member of the Pinta Island subspecies of the Galapagos tortoise." He met put his glasses in his jacket pocket. He didn't seem to need them. With his face more he seemed to gain dignity and a certain gravity. It was harder to dismiss him out of hand. Herbert didn't speak for a moment. Finally Granger added a couple of years ago. I met him once."

"You did?" Madness. Utter madness. Pure and simple.

"In the Galapagos Islands. It was a thing you have to visit. You should go. He was an enclosure with some of the races from different islands. They were fighting." Herbert leaned forward. "You know how Galapagos tortoises fight. They stand facing one another. Each one tries to stretch his head taller. Sometimes they sort of groan at one another. Then one gives up and stalks off." Herbert leaned back, shaking his head. "But in this case, Granger won. To the victor belong the spoils, right? So he went over to the boulder in the enclosure and tried to mate. He shook his head slowly. "He can't, we're not sure. Possibly because it was in fact a boulder. But maybe it was just being without a companionable female for so long. Herbert's good. I know how he feels."

It was fascinating. Like watching a slow motion derby train wreck. "You said conspiracy theories are good. Why?"

"You were caught in a genetic bottleneck. Of course, as soon as you started banding up you population, you started diverting up into tribes, factions, groups. Each little group attempting to create the most unique genetic destiny with such party starting materials. Pathetic and noble at the same time. Do you see it, defeating yourselves to yourselves? I sometimes wonder if your different colors appeared because of that. The way foxes and dogs developed multicolored coats when you domesticated them." He thought for a moment. "Not sure how that could ever be determined. But an interesting project to fund, though."

Okay, for a thought. This could be interesting. "Since we're the last man's human genetic diversity is such a good thing as far as you're concerned."

"If there were any of us left, it wouldn't be."

I had considered that. Humans out of Africa, what? A hundred twenty five thousand years ago. You're talking about a bottleneck fifty thousand years ago. Denisovans were extinct then. Cro-Magnon were, and of my ancestors. What were the odds? Evolu-

Herbert smiled softly. "I'm still human after all, if not the same subspecies as you." He set the speech writing as the last game in town.

"And your immortality couldn't help but raise a skeptical eyebrow. "So you have to be patient."

Herbert shrugged. "What else do I have to do?"

Tom chewed the inside of his cheek as it was getting close to lunch. "And what does all this have to do with conspiracy theories?"

"Well, we've made the point that there were all these incentives to cooperate. It was more than a factor. It was the reason religion was first created: recognizing that the process of developing general differences was [illegible] religion, cultural tokens, nation-states—they all served to keep different groups in a sort of semi-cooperative solution. More than trying to avoid differences. There had always been a conflict between the [illegible] and outcrossing in your people, but it was largely managed by your nomadic lifestyle and geographic barriers. And then [illegible] as hardware and software. As the hardware dissolved, you developed [illegible] barriers to take their place." Herbert smiled benignly. "And I was right there to help. A little push here. A little pull there. Just little things. Every little bit helped. It was a compound interest [illegible] needed some time, and I had plenty of that stored in [illegible]. Hittites, Greeks—each one was a distinct, [illegible] and [illegible] scattering their early [illegible] genetic portfolio throughout the general population."

"Why?"

"I was growing my stock." He [illegible] stopped and shook his head. "I'm *endowed* with a preservation stock."

"You're perpetuating the Spartans, the Boeotians, Hittites and Greeks," Tom said sarcastically.

"Not in so many words—"

"Glad to hear it!"

"I just helped their [illegible] and [illegible]." Herbert made a fist. "Keep the old Usual Suspects [illegible] and well-[illegible]."

"Which of course [illegible] to the [illegible] Trojans."

"No. But I did introduce Paris to the [illegible] party."

"A party."

"Hittite [illegible] shirtless [illegible] and [illegible] their first Latin [illegible]."

"You were going to reconcile the Atlantis and the Trojans through Paris and Helen?"

I did just about as well as we did on Herbert chuckled "Of course recreation was never my strength

Tom was right. Herbert's original idea had become a sort of game to him. Somewhere he could step back and play the depths of his commitment to characters and ideas with whatever it turned out to be.

Religious and cross-cultural boundaries Tom said at last

Herbert nodded non-committally Yes' He paused like I could be a real problem I've thought my religion big enough to cross cultural boundaries would have to own up that it's a system like Hinduism but it looked like Herbert pointed his finger at Tom What differences did it raise if you were Roman or German if you were Christian What difference did it make if you were Bedouin or Kurdish if you were Muslim? Herbert spread his hands in helplessness I myself like Shirley Sexton and the Reformation had to be introduced. Don't you see? I had to do it."

[illegible] It was now after two and the bar opened Tom signaled Dawn to stay and she took an order for beer Tom for a Bloody Mary for Herbert A woman wearing nothing but a tiny colored bikini and good intentions caught his eye and waved to him Tom saw it Brick was knocking back his sixth consecutive Glue Spirit gum I bet was not of spirit gum Just now to even his brain gum

Well I had the time Herbert beamed and held up his drink Bloody Mary What a triumph she was! But I digress I had even got my place Religion separate from religion Nation state separate from nation state Cultural group separate from cultural group Churches with churches with churches of god the pure that would last for a few generations getting different then degenerating and melting back into the general population

Herbert stood his drink was empty But long ago the nineteenth century I knew I was in trouble It was the Enlightenment you see I have to do with that You said that on your own Herbert shook his head Nation states started dumping all other cultural taboos and ideals Suddenly the only legitimate state was a nation state Where were you and I came punctuated equilibrium and so small groups of different people grab hold and have their own ideas and reach nations They would what to do How with their peculiar customs paint once they see I am?

Herbert wrung his hands. I desperately never gave up, but was surprised my [illegible] Herbert did [illegible] to look [illegible] arm affectionately.

Terri crossed the room again. He and Tom dragged [illegible] found himself [illegible] People [illegible] and here was a perfect example [illegible] "What did we do this time?"

Missed it. Herbert [illegible] I [illegible] [illegible] material I mean, out [illegible] [illegible] Thomas Paine [illegible] pamphlet [illegible] propelled a revolution. But I never considered [illegible] Never missed the power of massive print [illegible] publications during the Civil War [illegible] movements were the key. The Wobblies. The Anarchists. Immigrants. Industrial Communists. Hell, John Birch Society. The Prohibition Movement. The Know Nothings. Conspiracy [illegible] groups were born. Look at the Know Nothings' [illegible] Herbert wrung his hands. "The Know Nothings started as Protestant [illegible] members of the Native Party [illegible] to keep Catholics from becoming Methodist, which would [illegible] Democrat to Republican."

He [illegible] I [illegible] There was no end to this. Along the way [illegible] got [illegible] on [illegible] generation [illegible] Internet, the web, email, [illegible] spiders [illegible] around, which [illegible] potential [illegible] groups [illegible] They have to [illegible] national group. Splatter maps. Bring them together [illegible] Prod there—"

"Encourage an anthology?"

"Exactly!"

But we could [illegible] on the idea of conspiracies than anything else."

Herbert had [illegible] Archie Bunker [illegible] thought was [illegible] and [illegible] movement complete [illegible] exposed around [illegible] support exposed around [illegible] UFO [illegible] the secret [illegible] of the

actual facts of an event is considered *proof* of collusion and verification that the collusion is real. If your daughter brought home a UFO proponent as a prospective husband would you encourage the marriage?"

"Well—"

Don't equivocate. You would not. Maybe your meddling would prevent the marriage. Maybe it wouldn't. Regardless, it would still serve as the first step to speculation and doubt as the tale effects mount up. Ever little bit helps. Your anthology will satirize conspiracies. But *maybe it's the cure*, and those who it is specifically aimed at will fuel existing and possibly even *new* conspiracy theories. Every little bit helps. Until that great day when there is sufficient generic diversity and these sorts of things are no longer needed."

Tom stared back at his son. He considered Herbert for a moment. "What if I publish nothing that takes both of you? Won't that put a damper on your plans?"

Herbert laughed. "Do you love to see this in print. Name me. I am one of a million agents. I am not. I can only help."

"Why tell me?"

He threw up his hands. "Why not? Worst that happens is somebody thinks I'm a weird pervert for a few years. You'll be surprised how often that happens and how little effect it has. I'm in it for the long haul. So I tell anybody. Everybody. After all it takes—"

"Every little bit," Tom finished for him.

"Yes," beamed Herbert. "Exactly."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Scott Popkes is known primarily for [illegible] but has written as well for [illegible] and *New Legacy*. [illegible] Popkes [illegible] "Scott Popkes is [illegible] of hysterical laughter.)"

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Judith K. Dial was born in Hollywood, California, a circumstance she's never quite overcome. Her parents read SF in an era when it wasn't quite respectable for adults to do so. Judith is a former technical writer and a second-generation bookseller, specializing in science fiction. She is married, lives in New England, and works for www.amazingstoriesmag.com.

Thomas A. Easton recently retired as professor of science at Thomas College in Waterville, Maine, where he had been teaching environmental science, science, technology, and society, emerging technologies, and computer science (among others) since 1983. He continues to teach on-line, and he is now the Acting Chair of the Department of Natural and Applied Sciences at Mount Ida College in Newton, MA. He is also a well-known writer and critic of science fiction.

Thomas A. Easton and Judith K. Dial are the editors of three previous anthologies: *Visions of Tomorrow* (Skyhorse, 2010), *Impossible Futures* (Pink Narcissus, 2013), and *Decopunk* (Pink Narcissus, 2015).

Many people are responsible for the production of this book.

First are the writers, David L. Clements, Jeff Hecht, Rev DiCerto, Sarah Smith, Paul Di Filippo, Allen M. Steele, Cat Rambo & Mike Resnick, H. Paul Shuch, James L. Cambias, Shariann Lewitt, Debra Doyle & James D. Macdonald, and Steven Popkes, without whom we would not have anything to publish.

The Editors, Judith K. Dial & Thomas A. Easton, who developed the concept and selected the writers.

The Artist, Bob Eggleton, whose painting adorns the front of this book.

The volunteers of NESFA, Dave Grubbs, Tony Lewis, and Alice Lewis, who produced this book.

Rick Katze
NESFA Coordinator for the Book

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CONSPIRACY!

WE'RE PART OF THE COVER-UP!

Did you know that there is a secret government agency dedicated to creating conspiracy theories? It's true! It's on Facebook!

But it's not in this book. Our conspiracy theories are all fiction. At least, that's what we want you to think! Certainly, we did invite fiction writers to weigh in on conspiracy theories. The result includes (of course) the Masons and dragons (David Clements), the Bavarian Illuminati (Debra Doyle and James D. Macdonald) and the New World Order (Shariann Lewitt). There's also the Shaver Mystery (science writer Jeff Hecht), cell phones and weather control (Rev DiCerto), Atlantis and Lemuria (Paul DiFilippo), Roswell (H. Paul Shuch of SETI fame), mermaids (Cat Rambo and Mike Resnick), ancient immortals who guide our breeding (Steven Popkes), quality management (Allen Steele), and — of all things! — Santa Claus (James Cambias). Not to mention the squirrels (Sarah Smith).

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THE EDITORS

JUDITH K. DIAL was born in Hollywood, CA, a circumstance she's never quite overcome. Her parents read SF in an era when it wasn't quite respectable for adults to do so. She is married, lives in New England and works for www.amazingstoriesmag.com.

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